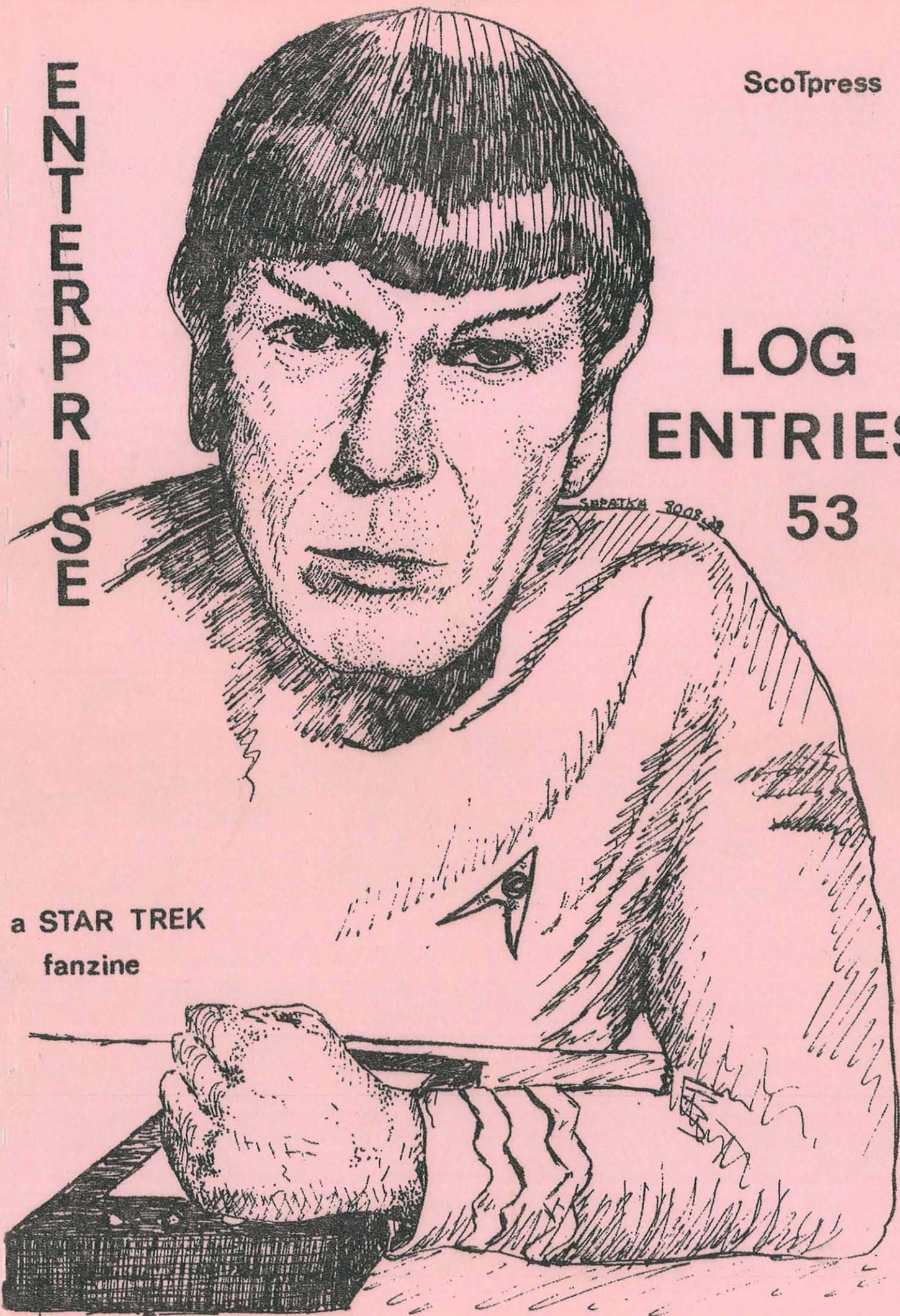


ENTERPRISE

Scotpress

LOG  
ENTRIES  
53

a STAR TREK  
fanzine



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Hello, everyone, and welcome to Enterprise - Log Entries 53.

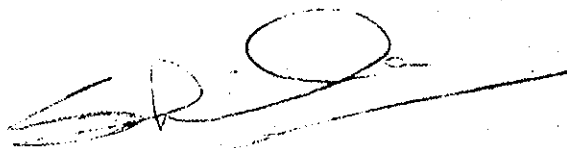
Just in case you're wondering, Valerie did do the donkey-work on this issue, even although I'm writing the editorial. Poor Valerie was in the final stages of doing the stencils when a tooth started giving her bother - and she ended up getting an abscessed wisdom tooth extracted, by which time she wasn't feeling in a fit state to do anything at all. Isn't it odd how some folk can forget that dentists exist for years at a time and still never need a single filling, while others go regularly every six months and still need emergency treatment between times.

We've been getting a lot of nice letters about Enterprise - Log Entries 50. Everyone seems to have enjoyed it (some even said 'Roll on No. 100' - will you come and help us put it out?) and there have been many nice things said about our writers and artists whose work was in No. 50. Thanks for all your comments, and we'd also like to take this chance to say publicly to our contributors how much we appreciate all your hard work; it's clear from the letters too that our readers also appreciate it.

Our plans for 1983, as well as one issue of Enterprise - Log Entries every two months, include the story of the early days of Amanda's marriage to Sarek, culminating in Spock's birth, which will be out in February; The World of Difference by Lesley Coles, where not being a mutant is dangerous, in April; All Loss Restored by Janet Stewart, a sequel to Time Is, Time Was, Time Yet to Be, where Kirk and Spock return to Vulcan's past, in June; Enterprise Personal Log 3 also in June; the sequel to Karen Hayden's One Last Wish Fulfilled (which was printed by Jenny Elson) in either June or August. In addition, we're working on Variations on a Theme 7, which we hope to have ready for August, and I'm working on Something Lost, a story set in the Something Hidden universe - I've had the idea for around seven years (if not eight) but it hasn't taken any sort of shape until now - and I'm hoping to have it ready for October. Meg Wright is also working on a story for us - one that will be a sequel to both As New Wine and With Hoops of Steel - and we hope to have it out before the end of the year. However, we've nothing in mind for 1984 yet, so we're still looking for submissions! May I just remind you of our policy - no K/S, no death of main characters or main characters leaving the Enterprise permanently; we like stories about character interaction set in an action-adventure format, with the crew of the Enterprise the Federation personnel interacting with any aliens, etc, that may come into the story.

But enough from me. The zine lies before you. Enjoy!

February 1983

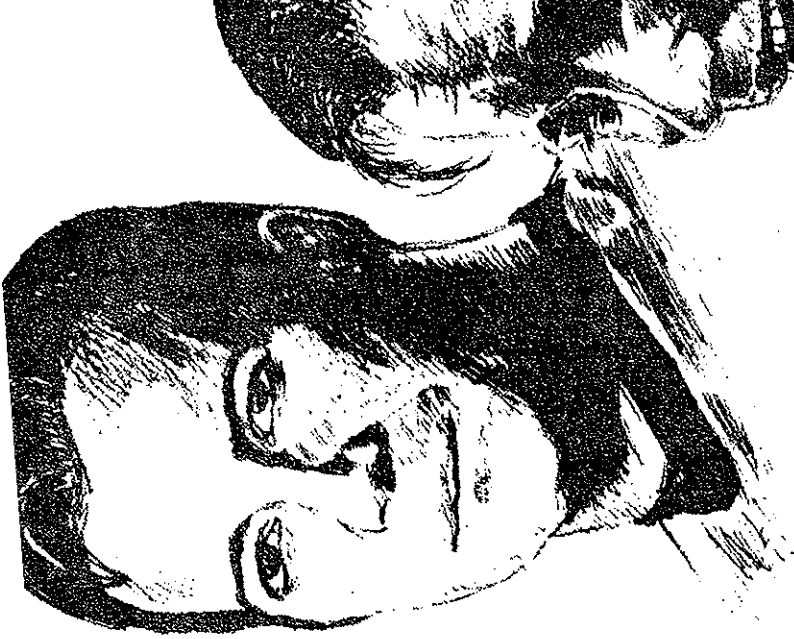


Submissions of fiction, poetry or artwork are always welcome for ScotPress zines, and should be sent to

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## NOT SO EASY

by

Doreen DaBinett

Spock glanced up as the slim figure entered the changing room. An eyebrow rose and was as quickly subdued. The object of his surprise ignored him stoically as he undressed, then turned.

"Okay, Spock, let's get this over with. And you can stop laughing, too!"

Both eyebrows now rose and disappeared into the dark bangs at the remark.

"I assure you, Dr. McCoy, I am not laughing," he said stiffly.

The doctor snorted disbelievingly. "Don't try and kid me, Spock - I know you."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, and that smug expression of yours stopped fooling me years ago!" McCoy snapped and walked out of the changing room.

The Vulcan followed more slowly. "Am I to assume that you are here for a workout, Doctor?" The tone was almost disbelieving.

"No - I come here all the time, just for the hell of it," McCoy said sarcastically. "Of course I'm here for a workout... and don't tell me you didn't know, either."

"I assure you, I did not look to see who I was scheduled with today," Spock replied calmly, unable to hide the glint of amusement in his eyes as he watched the Human stomp up to Mat Number 4. "Shall we practice a few throws, Doctor?" he asked tentatively.

"Yeah, okay, just remember I'm not as young as I used to be," McCoy replied defensively.

The Vulcan ignored him and took up a defensive stance. "Would you care to start?"

McCoy shrugged, and made a half-hearted attempt at a throw...

\* \* \*

Ten minutes later, panting and sweating, McCoy was on his back for the nth time.

"All right, all right," he gasped at last. "Let's call this farce off while I can still move."

"Doctor, if only you would allow me to show..."

"Enough's enough, Spock. I'm a doctor, dammit, not a punch bag for you," and ignoring the proffered hand he scrambled to his feet and limped to the shower.

He was still grumbling a few minutes later when he emerged to find the Vulcan showered, dressed, and waiting for him.

"Are you going to the Rec Room, Doctor?" At McCoy's nod he fell into step beside him.

"I suppose this was his idea of a joke."

"I beg your pardon?"

The blue eyes flashed angrily. "I said Jim must have set this up... scheduling you against me."

"The roster is worked out by the computer..." Spock began to explain.

"Yeah, and pigs might fly," McCoy muttered.

The Vulcan could not for the life of him see the connection between computers and pigs, and opened his mouth to voice his objection; then then thought better of it and closed it again at the expression on the older man's face.

As they walked into the Rec Room the doctor stood gazing around. "Jim's usually here at this time of day. I bet he daren't face me." The doctor walked over to the dispenser followed by Spock, and then went to sit at an empty table.

"Doctor, I am sure you are mistaken. I hardly think the Captain would go so far as to interfere with the computer merely to annoy you."

"Bull! If you don't know Jim Kirk by now, you never will!" McCoy snapped. "Hell, I'm going to lie down before I collapse." He stood up, both hands on the table, the coffee untouched. "And by the way, Spock... When you do see our elusive leader, just remind him that two can play at that game... His medical's due next week." And grinning evilly, the doctor left.

\* \* \*

Some time later, having finished his own work and returned to his quarters, the Vulcan picked up the report the Captain had requested and made his way along the corridor.

He was surprised when instead of the usual 'Come' in answer to his buzz, Kirk called out, "Who's there?"

"Mr. Spock, Captain. I have the report you requested."

The door slid obediently open.

"Come in, Spock, quick. Thank God it's you - I expected McCoy." The Human grinned widely. "What happened?"

The Vulcan stared at the cheerful face as realisation dawned. "Am I to take it that the doctor was correct, sir? You did tamper with the computer?"

"Yeah." Kirk chuckled loudly. "I've been trying to get my own back on him since he set me up with that blind date on Starbase 18."

"Blind date?" The Vulcan began to wonder if everyone, apart from himself of course, was going slightly crazy.

"She was as flat as a pancake, Spock, back and front no different, cross-eyed, and she had buck teeth!" He shuddered at the memory. "I was stuck with her all night, too. She had more damn arms than an octopus."

"Indeed?" The Vulcan's lips twitched as he listened to the sorry tale.

"Did McCoy guess it was me?"

"Yes." No point in lying.

"Damn. Never mind, I'll just have to stay out of his way for a while," Kirk said, then nodded at the report the Vulcan was still holding. "Put that down over there. I'll go over it later."

The Vulcan complied, then walked to the door, and as it opened turned back, his face a picture of innocence. "The doctor did ask me to remind you that your medical is due next week, sir."

And the door closed on Kirk's earthy expletive.

\* \* \*

Several hours later Kirk settled down with a sigh and a book. His peace offering - a bottle of rare Orion liqueur - had been accepted, albeit grudgingly, and he could relax once more, free from the threat of a 'McCoy Special', as he's come to call the worst kind of medicals.

He smiled contentedly and found his place in the novel, little realising that his peace of mind was soon to be shattered once more; but this time he would not find it so easy to put things right...

\* \* \*

Less than a fortnight later McCoy made his way up to the computer section. It was not an area he enjoyed visiting, but sometimes - like now - it was necessary. Especially when that blasted Vulcan all but took up residence there. Yes, there he was, engrossed as always.

"Ah, Spock." He waited expectantly. "SPOCK!"

"A moment, Doctor, if you please."

McCoy bounced up and down on the balls of his feet as he waited for the Vulcan to finish what he was doing and shut down the console.

"You wished to see me?"

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't, Spock." McCoy grabbed the nearest chair and straddled it, staring at the lean features in front of him in silence.

At last an eyebrow rose in enquiry, and McCoy, who had been searching for the right words, suddenly asked, "Have you noticed Jim lately?"

"Noticed? We are at the moment on the same shift. I cannot help but notice..."

McCoy swore at the Vulcan's literal mind, and interrupted. "Spock, he hasn't been himself for the last few days. Haven't you noticed?"

It often amused the Vulcan to 'put the doctor on', as Jim called it, and he almost asked who the Captain had been impersonating, but seeing the genuine concern in the blue eyes changed his mind at once. "No, Doctor, I have seen nothing untoward in the Captain's attitude."

McCoy sighed. "I'm sure I'm not imagining things. Although I had begun to wonder, till I was down on the Starbase today. Have you been off the ship since we arrived, Spock?"

The dark head shook in negation.

"Figures." The doctor picked up a scribe and tapped his teeth, obviously deep in thought.

Spock became aware - with a certain amount of surprise - that he too was beginning to fidget. He suppressed it at once. "What happened down on the Base to make you change your mind, Doctor?" he prompted, wondering how long it would be before he could get back to his computations again.

"Huh? Oh, I happened to bump into a friend of mine."

"I see," Spock said, and it was obvious that he didn't.

"He collects medals, Spock."

"Indeed." The Vulcan stood up abruptly. "I am sure the fact that you met a friend down on the Base who collects medals is important to you, Doctor. However, I can see no..."

"Sit down, Spock!" McCoy snapped the order without thinking, and as the lean figure obeyed, went on, "It may have no connection at all with Jim, of course, but Steve Mikes has been after a certain medal for his collection for years now, only there are only three in existence." He paused. "The Karagite Order of Heroism."

He saw the Vulcan's expression change. "That's right, Spock. Jim is one of the three recipients. Now Steve told me today that he has just bought one from a dealer. It seems rather a coincidence, doesn't it?"

"Not really, Doctor. Have you checked to see who the other two recipients were, and whether they are in the vicinity of this Starbase? It could be, of course, that they sold through an agent or nominee and are not here themselves."

McCoy nodded. "Yes, yes, I thought of all that, Spock. I even checked up myself. Commodore Zalta Yass, an Andorian, received the very first one; he donated it to the Military Museum on Andor - it's still there. The other was

General Halse Valderhelm, a Rigellian. He died two years ago, and following the custom of his people all his medals, awards and military honours were buried with him."

"I see. It is of course the Captain's own affair if he has decided to dispose of the medal, Doctor."

"I know that, Spock, but I also know what it meant to him. He was more proud of that than any of the others."

The Vulcan paused momentarily. "I agree."

"So why sell it?"

"We do not know for certain that he has," Spock replied calmly.

"But..."

"It could well be a fake that your friend has bought."

"Not Steve! It'll be genuine!" The doctor got up and began to pace up and down. "I'll be honest, Spock. I don't like the smell of this at all."

The Vulcan bit back a comment, and waited patiently for the doctor to continue, his own mind working overtime. Jim had seemed a trifle brusque lately, and had even cut short their chess match the other evening, pleading tiredness. He came to a decision.

"The Captain has seemed a little different lately," he admitted.

McCoy pounced. "Different? In what way?"

Spock explained.

"Hmmm. Scotty said more or less the same thing."

"You have discussed this with Mr. Scott?" The tone was disapproving.

"Not in so many words; or in so much detail. I do know how to be discreet, you know," McCoy said sharply.

"Of course. I am sorry, Doctor. However, even if he has sold his medal I hardly think we can, or should, do anything about it. He would not thank us for interfering."

"I know that too, Spock. What I can't understand is, he sold it for one hell of a lot of money. Now, Jim's no pauper; he's not a millionaire either, mind you, but Starfleet Captains get damn good salaries. What does he want the extra cash for?" He looked up at the dark eyes. "I know, mind my own business." He chewed his lips reflectively. "I'll see you later, Spock."

"Doctor."

McCoy turned at the door.

"What are you intending to do?"

"Do? I'm going to ask him." And the lean blue-clad figure walked purposefully towards the turbolift.

\* \* \*

"Mind your own damn business, McCoy!"

"It is my business, Captain."

"Like hell it is!" Kirk's chin jutted out angrily.

"Anything that I feel interferes with the health and welfare of the crew - and that includes you, Jim - is my business." He paused, and then went on more softly, "I'm your friend too, aren't I?"

The hazel eyes flashed a warning. "Then if you're my friend, Doctor, stop interfering."

"Just tell me why, then. If you've got financial problems I have to know."

It could interfere..."

"I have no financial troubles, Doctor. Goddammit, I decide to sell off a worthless piece of tin, and you'd think it was my soul..."

"Isn't it?" The blue eyes bored into him relentlessly. "Those 'bits of tin' mean one hell of a lot to you, Jim, so don't try to deny it."

"I'm not." Kirk sat down heavily on a chair. "Bones, please. I honestly can't tell you. If you're my friend you'll accept that." He looked up pleadingly.

McCoy noted the tenseness in the neck muscles, the nerve jumping in the cheek. His friend was already under a tremendous strain without his adding to it. He would have to leave it for now.

"Okay, Jim, but if you need help... you know where to come."

Kirk nodded and smiled slightly as McCoy walked slowly to the door.

"Bones."

"Yes?"

"Thanks."

\* \* \*

Kirk sat and stared at the door long after it had closed behind the doctor. When the message tape had arrived for him a few days before they arrived at the Starbase, he had assumed it was just a routine one from Earth, and had not bothered to listen to it until after his watch, putting it to one side till he had eaten and could then sit and listen to all the news in peace.

However, instead of the face he had expected, the screen had lit to show nothing but sound lines, and a completely unfamiliar voice had begun to speak. At first he had thought it was a joke, someone with a weird sense of humour, but then it had become only too obvious that the message was in deadly earnest, and he was soon in no doubt that he was being contacted by the Zh'Hashi Group. An unfamiliar tingle of fear ran down his back.

The Group, as most Humans referred to them, was made up of various political and religious agitators and fanatics who were hell-bent on changing the Federation to suit themselves. They were made up of people from every known race, their leader being a Vulcan who for a time prior to joining the Zh'hashi had led a minority splinter party on Vulcan dedicated to overthrowing the present system of logic and total non-violence and taking their people back to the doubtful 'glory' of their violent past before the days of Surak.

Kirk remembered vividly the rare occasion when Spock had surprisingly joined in a discussion in the Rec Room one evening about the Zh'Hashi. It was the only time he had seen his First Officer show openly his dislike of them, the Vulcan who led them, and all they stood for.

The funds to finance their dubious operations came from many sources, donations from wealthy but foolish sympathisers, robberies, drug running between planets, and kidnapping... the list was endless.

Scotty had likened them that evening to a modern-day Mafia, but McCoy had disagreed. The Mafia were too close-knit, he had argued, rarely accepting anyone into their ranks from outside their own nationality, and almost never into their heirarchy. The Group, on the other hand, had no such limitations. The only criteria they had was a total dedication to the achieving of their ultimate goal - the complete destruction of what they saw as the weak and decadent Federation, and the setting up of an Empire, on similar lines to the Klingon one, where the strong would rule and the weak - as always throughout history - would serve and obey.

Spock had agreed completely with McCoy and his assessment; it was the more memorable because it was one of the few times that the C.M.O. of the Enterprise and her First Officer had openly agreed.

And now Kirk hated not being able to confide his problem to either of them, but his instructions, and the threat that had accompanied them, had left him no alternative but to remain silent. It would not be fair to involve them in what was purely his own affair.

Selling his medal down on the Base had perhaps been foolish and an act of desperation, but it was his, and there was nothing in Starfleet Regulations that said he could not sell any of them if he wished to. At ceremonial occasions it was only necessary for him to wear the appropriate ribbon tag, the medal itself was not necessary... besides, he had consoled himself, he could always have a duplicate made, no-one would ever know.

He sighed softly, wondering how he was going to raise the remainder of the amount he needed. Not that he could not do so, of course, given time; he was far from poor. But it was finding the necessary credits at such short notice that was proving so difficult. He had no time to sell his various shares or assets profitably. His accountant had contacted his bankers and arranged for half the amount to be made available to him, using his shares as collateral. The sale of the medal had brought in another quarter, but he still had one quarter to find, and knowing the Zh'Hashi, they would not be prepared to wait past their deadline.

The only one who could possibly help him was Spock; no-one else on board, apart perhaps from McCoy, would have that amount of money readily available, and the doctor would ask just too many questions, as their recent meeting had shown. He was still left with Spock.

He straightened his shoulders purposefully; although a passingly good poker player, he had never considered himself a very adept liar, especially where the Vulcan was concerned, and he didn't like the idea of lying now - especially not to Spock. But he had no choice. No choice at all. He reached for the intercom.

"Mr. Spock?"

"Spock here, sir."

"Can I see you in my quarters, please?"

"I'm on my way, sir."

Kirk sat and stared at the desk till the buzzer mobilised him into action and he touched the door release. "Come."

The familiar figure strode in.

\* \* \*

The Vulcan stood in his own quarters, the darkness relieved only by the glow of the firepot. It seemed McCoy, for once, had been correct. He had managed to hide his surprise well when Kirk had requested the credit loan till the end of the month at a most favourable rate of interest - not that that had influenced his decision at all. His Captain could have had all his considerable assets had he requested it, and the amount involved was, to the Vulcan at least, incredibly small.

No, it was the reason Kirk needed it that worried him. Not for one moment had he believed the reason Kirk had given... Jim had always been a poor liar, at least as far as he personally was concerned.

Of course, it might well be that the sale of the medal and Jim's request to him were in no way connected, but Spock was not naive enough to be able to accept that readily. He should, perhaps, consult McCoy, but that would be breaking Jim's confidence, and he did not feel his own flimsy doubts would justify that.

Perhaps Jim did indeed need the money to pay an unexpected debt that had to be met at once, before the interest from various shares could be paid into his account at the end of the current month. It sounded plausible enough, and

anyone less attuned to this particular Human might have just accepted the explanation at face value, but not Spock.

He moved into his sleeping alcove and sat down heavily on the bed, bending to pull off first one boot then the other. Still dressed, he stretched out on the bed and stared unseeingly at the ceiling as he began to plan his next move.

\* \* \*

Kirk was up inside an inspection tube with the Chief Engineer when a young ensign's face appeared beneath him.

"Captain Kirk, sir? Are you up there?"

"Yes, Ensign. What is it?" Kirk attempted a feeble smile, and was obviously more successful than he had expected to be, for the young face relaxed as the man went on,

"The transporter room said to tell you the box of chocolates you requested has just been beamed up, and they've sent them to your quarters, sir."

"Thank you." Kirk glanced at his companion. "If you don't need me for anything else then, Scotty?"

"No, Captain. I just thought you should see what caused all that trouble a wee while ago." The Scotsman smiled and watched as his young Captain slid out of the tube and with a perfunctory wave hurried away.

Kirk had been expecting The Group to contact him again shortly, as they'd intimated. He'd just never expected it to be in this manner. The box of chocolates, of course, would have been scanned for drugs and metal etc. down on the Base before being beamed aboard as normal procedure, but Kirk knew there would be a simple message, perhaps hand written, perhaps a tape, inside the box, nothing to interest the scanners at all... and he proved to be correct.

The drop-off point for the money was well outside the City limits. Kirk leaned forward and punched up a map of the area. He was instructed to hire an aircar, make his way there, and wait to be contacted.

Kirk chewed his lips as he considered every aspect of the 'drop'. He smiled mirthlessly at the strange word - it was far more suited to Bela Oxmyx than himself. Well, he had often wondered how he would react to this sort of situation. So often, when he had heard about others and what they had done, it had been so easy to condemn them for their weakness. So very simple, when you're detached from the actual situation to sit back and say, he should have done this, or he should have done that; so glib... until it actually happened to you - then it really came home and you suddenly discovered that you too were so very Human... and vulnerable.

If it had been something that affected his ship or his position in the Fleet then he would have had to evaluate it all again, and his decision would then, he knew, have been very different; but this was purely personal. The Zh'Hashi were obviously very very clever. They knew just what buttons to press and which screw to turn to get the desired result - and they'd hit Kirk right on his most vulnerable spot. Also, their inside information was fantastic. They had known exactly when the Enterprise would arrive at Starbase 8.

It had proved far easier than he had anticipated to lie convincingly to his First Officer who, though he must have been surprised at his Captain's request, had nevertheless agreed at once to make the capital he required available to him, and he had at once got in touch with his bankers. The open credit note had arrived within the hour on Spock's oral instructions, without any questions being asked.

The only thing that worried Kirk was the fact that The Group had made no reference as to how they would meet their side of the bargain. Although of course they had never been known not to honour their obligations. After all, it would not have been good policy to allow future victims to learn that others, in like circumstances, had paid up and then not been satisfied.

He glanced up at the chronometer; three hours, and it would take an hour to reach the rendezvous point. He'd beam down shortly and hire the aircar.

A wave of near panic swept through him like a brush fire - what if one of their number was a sadist? What if...? Stop it! He had no choice, after all, and worrying now would achieve nothing. He simply had to wait and see - and hope. And waiting, to a man of Kirk's temperament, was the hardest task of all...

\* \* \*

Kirk duly beamed down, and having arranged for an aircar at the appropriate time made his way to the nearest bar, ordering a drink and making his way to a booth facing a mirrored wall. He had only been sitting for a moment when a shadow fell across the table, and he glanced up, expecting to see the waiter.

"Spock." He smiled an instant welcome. "I didn't expect to find you in here."

"I required a drink," the Vulcan replied smoothly.

Kirk couldn't help a loud chuckle. "Yes, I suppose this would be the place to come for that," he conceded.

"Indeed. May I join you, sir?"

"Yeah, of course. Sit down, Spock." He slid over on the seat and the Vulcan sat down beside him.

Kirk's drink duly arrived and Spock too ordered one. Then he turned to his Captain.

"Are you staying on the Base?" he asked quietly.

Caught off guard, Kirk shook his head. "No, I've... er... ordered an aircar. I'm taking a run out into the country, just for a few hours."

"Indeed. It sounds most interesting. Would you object to my accompanying you?" The dark eyes studied him carefully, watching the myriad expressions chasing across the mobile features. He had obviously caught the Human unawares.

"I... er... I had thought I'd go alone, Spock..." Damn! The first time Spock actually asks me if he can come along, and doesn't wait for me to ask him, and I've got to slap him down.

"I would endeavour not to interfere, sir. A trip out from the Base would, I'm sure, prove most beneficial after the enclosed environment of the Enterprise."

Kirk looked up suspiciously; McCoy might have come up with that argument, but Spock?

The Vulcan's drink arrived, and Kirk emptied his own glass quickly before he spoke.

"What's all this about, Spock?" he asked softly.

"I could ask you the same question, Jim."

"Damn. I thought McCoy was bad enough. I don't like people - even friends - to poke and pry into my personal affairs."

Spock almost fidgetted with mortification, understanding completely, exactly, how Kirk felt; he himself would not thank anyone... But this was not himself, it was Kirk, a Human, and perhaps most important of all, his friend.

"Jim. What is wrong?" he asked gently.

"Nothing! Goddammit, I ask you to do me a favour, and I get the third degree."

An uneasy silence fell between them, and after a moment Kirk's eyes rose to meet the Vulcan's in the mirror facing them. He bit his lip almost nervously.

"Look, if I tell you, I want your promise that you won't interfere with what I have to do, okay?"

Spock nodded once, and Kirk ordered another drink for them both and waited till they arrived before he continued.

"It's the Zh'Hashi Group." He waited, and felt the lean figure beside him stiffen in surprise.

"Blackmail?"

"No." Kirk laughed softly, but without any humour. "I've nothing in my murky past to interest them." He hesitated, swirling the liquid around sloppily in his glass. "They want half a million credits." He tapped his hip. "I've got the credit note here."

He waited expectantly, but Spock did not question him, waiting for him to tell it in his own time and words.

"They've got Peter, Spock. He was taken from school. It's the summer vacation; they told the authorities they'd come to pick him up to bring him to see me on holiday. They forged my voice print and signature, of course, but there was no reason for anyone to doubt or look further into it... If I pay the credits over he'll be returned to me unharmed. If I don't... I still get him back...piece by piece!"

The Vulcan's face was immobile as he said quietly, "You have considered the fact that the money will obviously be put to use buying weapons and..."

Kirk's eyes were huge in the suddenly pale face as Spock went on remorselessly, "... many innocent people will be killed by..."

"Don't you think I don't know all that?" Kirk interrupted. "But it's Peter, my nephew, and I know him..." His voice fell. "I don't know them. If it wasn't my money, it would be someone else's." He looked up again, begging to be understood. "I couldn't bear it if they hurt him. He's only a child still."

"You don't know that they will return him intact."

"Yes I do, Spock. They always do, if we pay up. They know if they don't return them they'd never get anyone else to cooperate. This isn't just a one-off thing, you know."

"It is still one life to be weighed against many," the deep voice intoned.

Kirk stared at him as if seeing him for the first time. "You bastard! You unfeeling..." He choked on the words, and put the glass down with shaking hands. "Let me out of here - now!"

"No."

"Look, I don't want to have a scene in here, but if you don't let me past, I will."

"Jim, please. I do understand how you feel, but I am first and foremost a Vulcan, and an Elder of the High Council of my planet. I am also an officer in Starfleet, and your First Officer. It is my duty to say these things, to point out what it is you are contemplating... But I am also Spock, your friend, and I ask you, please, to tell me, and let me help." A lean hand touched Kirk's trembling one. "Please."

Kirk swallowed quickly. "You had me worried for a moment there, Spock. I thought my assessment of you over the years was all wrong. I'm sorry."

"Accepted." The Vulcan steepled his fingers and stared at him in the mirror. "Tell me exactly what you have to do."

"Spock, if I make the drop they'll let Peter go. They always keep their word, that's why everyone pays up." He stopped. "That Tellarite, Stavros, last year, was the only one who didn't play ball. You heard what happened to his daughter." Kirk suddenly looked and felt sick.

"Yes."

"I'm not going to let that happen to Peter." The voice was determined.

"I agree. Now, tell me." A gentle order.

Kirk did so, quickly and concisely. "So you see why I can't take you with me?"

"Of course."

Kirk smiled. "With any luck I'll be back here in a few hours. They'll either give Peter to me there, or when I get back here. How about having dinner together tonight to celebrate at the Base hotel?"

"I would be honoured." Spock slid out of the seat and allowed the Human to move. "Take care, Captain. Bandits too operate in that area."

"You bet... and thanks, Spock." Kirk stood up, then bent down again, his voice dropping quietly. "It could well have been someone you care for, you know."

The dark eyes stared up into his expressionlessly. "Yes, Captain, I realise that." Perhaps more than you know, Jim.

\* \* \*

The spot The Group had chosen could not have been better picked; Kirk could only admire their planning. It was in the middle of an open plain, the grey parched soil reaching to the horizon in every direction, broken only by an occasional short-growing flat-leaved shrub. Kirk brought the small craft to rest and climbed out to stretch his legs.

Whoever he was to meet had obviously not arrived yet, was probably watching from a safe distance to make certain he was alone and had not been followed.

An hour slipped by, and Kirk began to move restlessly about, wondering if he had come to the right place, but dismissing the notion at once because he knew that he had. So where the hell were they? Surely they could see he was alone, and hadn't been followed? After a while he began to kick up the dirt with his boots. Then he stood gazing to the distant horizon. He suddenly lifted a fist and slammed it hard onto the soft metal side of the aircar.

"You really must learn patience, Captain Kirk."

The Human whirled round at once as a small Andorian stood up in the middle of one of the small bushes where he had obviously been hiding.

"Why the hell didn't you speak before?" Kirk demanded angrily.

"We had to be sure you were indeed alone, and..." he touched a small communicator at his belt, "I am in touch with my colleagues now."

"Okay, so where's my nephew?"

"Patience, patience. My goodness, you Terrans are touchy, aren't you?" His antennae quivered with obvious amusement. "You have the packet, Captain?"

"Yes. But I want to see Peter first."

"Impossible. He is not here." The Andorian brushed Kirk's objections aside. "We keep our bargains, Captain... in all things. As you are no doubt fully aware. So do not think to cancel the credit note after, or try to warn the planetary authorities about my presence... or else..." The innuendo was clear. "Even when he is back with you, Human, our arms are long; very long indeed. He will be returned to you on the Base. Now, the package?" He held out his hand.

Kirk hesitated for a moment, but he did after all have no real option but to trust them. He handed over the credit.

"Now you will get back into your vehicle and return to the Base."

Kirk obeyed, frustrated that he could do nothing in retaliation. Peter's life was in the balance. Just before the engine sprang to life the Andorian leaned forward and called through the small window.

"Enquire at the Reception Desk at the Base Hotel, Captain."

\* \* \*

The journey back to the town seemed to take forever, but in actual fact with the slight wind now behind him it was accomplished far more quickly than the outward journey.

The Reception clerk, on hearing his name, handed over a room key, and Kirk quickly made his way over to the elevator.

Room 736 was on the 22nd floor, and Kirk found he was fumbling nervously with the old-fashioned lock.

At first he thought he had been tricked, though that would have been pointless, as he well knew; but then a muffled cry took him into the bedroom to find the youth gagged and tied up on the bed.

He pulled the plaster off Peter's mouth first and began to untie the ropes as his nephew bombarded him with questions as to what had happened. As the last rope fell away to the floor, Kirk began to massage life back into the cramped muscles, and the boy yelped with pain as the blood began to flow freely again.

"How'd you find me, Uncle Jim?"

"It's a long story, Peter. I don't want you saying a word to anyone about any of this, understood?"

"Okay... Is the Enterprise here?"

"Yes."

"Gee, did you bring her here just to get me?" The eyes were wide.

"Not exactly." Kirk smiled at the young face. "Now just calm down and listen. Did you see any of your captors?"

"No; they kept me blindfolded all the time, and never spoke in my presence."

Kirk nodded. It was only what he had expected; the Zh'Hashi were nothing if not professional, and if Peter had seen or heard anything... he would not be here now.

"You were held to ransom," Kirk explained.

"Kidnapped? Me?" The hazel eyes, so like his own, widened with excitement. "How much did they want for me, Uncle Jim?"

"Quite a lot," Kirk replied lightly as he stood up. "More than you're worth, young man." He paused. "Look, Peter... the Enterprise will be leaving in the next day or so."

"Can I come with you? Where am I, anyway?"

"No, not this time, you can't; and you're on Starbase 6."

"Can I see Mr. Spock before you go?"

"He's having dinner with us tonight."

"Great!"

"Peter, will you please listen! I'm arranging for you to return to Earth on the next direct passenger liner. You will stay at the Terran Embassy till then, and once you are on the vessel you don't get off anywhere en route, is that clear?"

"Aw, Uncle Jim, it's sure to stop at least 3 times on the way back, and I've always wanted to..."

"I said, you're not to get off!" Kirk barked in his best command voice. "Not for anything at all. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," Peter said meekly, knowing his uncle was no longer joking.

"Right. Now let's get you cleaned up and we'll go for a walk to unstiffen those legs of yours before we meet Spock. Have you eaten?"

"Yes - they fed me well, but it was monotonous food."

Kirk looked at his nephew's clothes; they were a bit the worse for wear, but would have to do. He'd have to get him some new ones for the journey home tomorrow.

\* \* \*

Unexpectedly, Spock was late arriving for dinner, and Kirk's eyebrows rose as he approached.

"My apologies, Captain. I was delayed." The dark eyes turned to Peter and softened imperceptibly. "I trust you are well?"

"Yes, thanks, Mr. Spock. You'll never guess what's happened to me!" he blurted, and then glanced quickly at his uncle to see if it was permitted for him to continue. Seeing the slight nod he rushed on, monopolising the rest of the evening, which suited both Kirk and the Vulcan admirably.

After dinner Kirk booked his nephew into a better room at the hotel, that he too could share, and they all three went up.

As Peter disappeared into the bathroom Kirk stretched out beside Spock on the one couch and switched on the video for the local and Federation news. By mutual but silent agreement they had decided to wait until Peter was in bed before Spock would leave.

The newscaster droned on about the latest incident involving the Tellarites and the Orions - the independent mediator sent by Rigel III was still in orbit awaiting the Tellarites agreement to begin the talks. The trade discussions with the Klingons were now being held on Vulcan, and Sarek's face flashed onto the screen for a moment as a member of the committee. Then came the local news, and Spock leaned forward to switch it off, but Kirk stopped him.

"Might as well let it go, Spock. Peter's taken root in the bathroom. We've nothing better to do."

"You could tell me exactly what happened."

"I'll do that later, when we're back on board."

"Very well."

The local news proved to be equally uninspiring. Violence had broken out between three opposing teams at a local sporting event. A group of tourists had got themselves lost in the Saskamach Mountains. Kirk stifled a yawn. Bandits had been chased by the local guards after an attack on a pay office, and two Andorians had been arrested as illegal immigrants, neither having any papers or giving any explanation as to why they were here.

Kirk stared in surprise as the screen displayed each in turn. The second one was only too familiar. The Guards had been called by a citizen who had found them unconscious and apparently robbed, though both had strenuously denied that they had been robbed of anything. They would be appearing in court later in the week, as the Andorian Ambassador had requested their immediate extradition to their home planet to answer various charges there.

"Spock, I know that one."

"Indeed."

Kirk turned to his First Officer quickly; something in the tone of the voice had... Yes, he was correct; he could always 'read' his Vulcan.

"Okay, Spock. Give. What have you been playing at?" he demanded.

"Playing, Captain? I assure you I have not..."

"All right, smart ass; you know exactly what I want to know."

Spock gave a sigh of mock resignation and reached into his pocket. "I believe this is yours, sir."

Kirk stared at the packet in horror. "Spock, what the hell have you done?" His face was white. "They can still get to Peter. I can't protect him all the time, and..."

"Jim, please. Credit me with a little intelligence." The ~~ark~~ eyes glinted with amusement again as he went on, "When I touched your hand in the bar I attached a microdot tracer to your skin. I was then able to monitor you. I waited until you were well clear, and then when the Andorian left I followed him. He met up with his partner, as I expected he would - they usually work in pairs, and the rest of The Group will not be on this planet. I waited also for them to contact their superiors and tell them that you had paid up on time, and that Peter was free. I then..." He paused, and a smile touched the stern face. "I then held them up in an alleyway - not very original, I am afraid, but nonetheless effective."

"But they must have recognised your unifrom and connected you with me," Kirk began.

"Captain, I was of course dressed as a native. They would not connect the holdup with you at all. Many bandits and robbers operate on this planet, as they well know... and you had paid up. The transaction was at an end. They were merely robbed, by a stranger... and just to ensure that they did not connect me..." He paused, obviously now very embarrassed. "Once I had rendered them unconscious I implanted certain ideas and memories into their minds."

Kirk grinned widely, and then sobered quickly. "Thanks, Spock. At least I'll know when I hear about their next atrocity that I haven't contributed anything towards it, no matter how small. But I wonder what difference it all makes? The Zh'Hashi will still carry on murdering, disrupting, trying to force their ideas on the rest of us..."

"I agree. I am only sorry I was unable to do more than recover your money. However, their leader - who is a Vulcan, as you know - is also a powerful telepath, and when I touched the Andorians' minds today, I felt his presence. They would die before they would betray him, or the Zh'Hashi; he has ensured that. It is regrettable, but true. I was unable to learn anything of value from either of them."

"Never mind; at least you tried. Which is more than I did," Kirk said softly.

"Do not blame yourself now, Jim. Your nephew was their prisoner; you had no real choice."

"Yes, you're right."

"Can I sit up and watch the vidi, Uncle Jim?" Peter had emerged from the bathroom unnoticed.

"No," Kirk grinned. "I'm having Bones beam down to give you a once-over tomorrow, just to make sure you're as healthy as you look."

"Good - I like Dr. McCoy."

Once Peter was in bed Kirk closed the door and then sat down in relief. "I don't know about you, Spock, but I could do with a drink. I think Peter's safe enough now... Join me?"

"Yes." They walked to the elevator in companionable silence.

"Spock, I've been thinking. Implanting those 'ideas' in the Andorian's minds was hardly ethical." His eyes twinkled.

"No sir, it was not," the Vulcan agreed at once. "But as I have heard you observe to the doctor on more than one occasion, it is sometimes necessary to fight fire with fire."

Kirk smiled up into the familiar face. "Yes, Mr. Spock, that is quite logical," he said, and he bowed the Vulcan into the bar.

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### EVERLASTING BOND OF FRIENDSHIP

The music flowed around me  
As I sat beside my friend,  
And my thoughts revolved,  
Dwelling on what could be  
In some future time...  
Fear reigns...

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\* \* \* \* \*  
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Reminiscent of a requiem  
For what my life would be again,  
Without him at my side.  
He is so headstrong, so adamant  
To do what he thinks he must  
In the role of Captain.

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But one day an impulsive action  
Done out of duty,  
Will cause life's forces to leave him  
And fly onward to another realm,  
To join with another's breath,  
Leaving both of us without life.

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We have two halves a whole become,  
Synchronised, one with the other's thoughts,  
And dreams, and hopes and plans.  
Fate has drawn us together  
And caused our lives to have a meaning  
Never before dreamed of.

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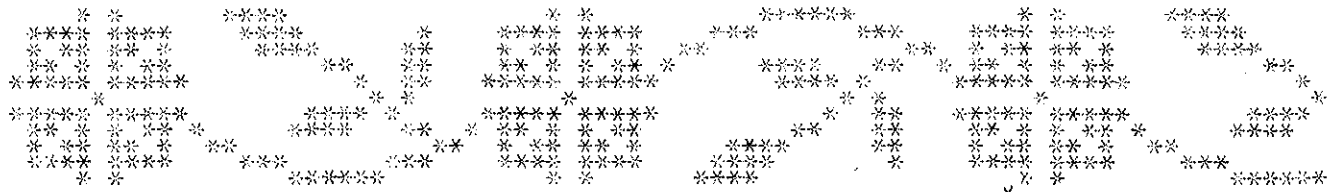
And yet the fear remains -  
That all could end as quickly  
As a breath can be exhaled.  
Life's infinite mystery which gave us  
Each other to care for and love,  
Can just as easily take one from the other.

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He smiles at me, hazel eyes sparkling,  
And I respond as only he understands.  
Subliminal smile, and transference  
Of love and understanding with a touch.  
Nothing can destroy what we have,  
For time does not halt with death.  
Life goes on for now - and love lives on forever.

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Karen Hayden

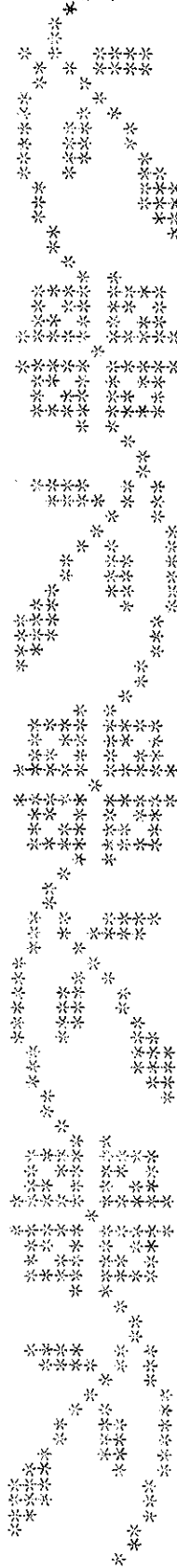


### REASONS

For nine seasons I have sat  
and tried to forget you.  
For all time I thought I had  
emptied my mind of you.  
But I acknowledge you in a  
memory that is evil to my mind and  
enchanted to my heart.  
I feel your presence in my heart,  
but you are not visible to my mind.  
Perhaps the time has altered us both  
and made me realise I was a fool to try and forget you.

So my answer is not here,  
I felt my bitterness,  
not even I as a Vulcan could hide.  
And so I left  
and came to you.  
I hated you for the prize  
that the memory of you had lost  
and loved you because the  
memory was still there.  
(Even then I had Human thoughts.)  
I came to you as a Vulcan  
but could not remain.  
Kirk prevailed  
my Kirk...  
And I gave you my naked heart  
and my bare emotions  
and your eyes spoke to me  
and said, "I understand, lonely one,  
I understand."

Elaine Leeke



## THE PRACTICAL JOKE

by

SUE SKEWINGTON

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Ensigns Joss Moore, Harry Telman and Mary Krasnowicz clustered, giggly, around Lt. Jerry Cardew as he held up what looked like an official Starfleet application form. They were gathered in the Bio-chemistry Lab, and all four wore the blue uniform of the Science Department.

Mary stared at her friend, awe writ large on her pretty countenance. "Jerry, you may be head of the Enterprise Practical Jokers Quorum, but not even you dare pull one on Mr. Spock."

"Oh no?" he replied. "It took me ages to print these application forms, so just watch me and see if I dare or not."

With that he sat down and began to fill in the form, chuckling gleefully as he wrote. His three pals exchanged worried glances. Playing practical jokes was one thing (and these four were almost invariably at the bottom of any occurring on the Enterprise), but they all felt Jerry had gone too far this time in choosing the Vulcan Science Officer (and First Officer to boot!!) as his intended victim. Ah well, no doubt they could look forward to a lengthy sojourn in the brig, or at the least a long and very comprehensive lecture on the illogic of playing practical jokes.

\* \* \*

The unwitting subject of the nefarious plot sat at his office desk working steadily through the mountainous pile of reports and sundry other paper work requiring his attention. This was the only disadvantage of being First Officer and Science Officer, he decided... double the paper work.

Finishing with one form (a request to use lab facilities for some private research), he gave his attention to the next. One eyebrow crept slowly towards his hairline as he read through the curious and unfamiliar document.

Obviously not genuine or meant to be taken seriously; Spock came to the conclusion that it could only be what the Humans termed a 'practical joke'. The First Officer was well aware of Lt. Cardew's predilection for these illogical and juvenile pranks (it had been Cardew and his three cronies who had sent 15 crew-women invitations to a recent ships dance, all of which appeared to have been issued by Ensign Chekov.) However, Mr. Spock was somewhat surprised that even Cardew would dare to make HIM the victim of one of his pranks.

Spock sat back and, steepling his fingers, pondered over the best course of action he could take. No doubt it was expected that being a Vulcan (and therefore having no sense of humour) he would either fail to recognise it as a joke and treat it as genuine, or alternatively fall into the trap set for him and amuse them all by delivering a lecture on the illogic of practical jokes.

He did not even consider taking disciplinary measures, as the only purpose that would serve would be to lower morale.

What he decided to do was most definitely not logical (and if word of it ever got back to Vulcan he would certainly be disgraced), but it would have a most salutary effect on the jokers, for they had neglected to take into consideration the fact that he was half Human, and did have a sense of humour - although he rarely let it show.

Having concluded his deliberations Spock left his office, and taking the form with him, headed for Sickbay. Dr. McCoy looked up in surprise as the First Officer walked voluntarily into his domain.

"Well well, and what can I do for you, Spock? Decided to join the Human race at last?"

"Certainly not, Doctor. I am not yet bereft of sanity." //And I wonder

APPLICATION TO BE ILL

(This form must be submitted at least 21 days before the Stardate on which you wish illness to commence.)

NAME...~~Jessyn~~ Cardew..... RANK.....~~Lieutenant~~..... SERVICE NO. 1506-394CA...

DEAPRTMENT...Sciences..... POSITION HELD...Bio-chemist.....

NATURE OF ILLNESS...Rigelian fever.....  
 DATE ON WHICH YOU WISH ILLNESS TO COMMENCE...Stardate 5263.8.....  
 (Applications to suffer from pregnancy must be submitted 12 months prior and be accompanied by Form W.S.36/24/98.)  
 CONSENT OF HUSBAND/WIFE....Not applicable.....

HAVE YOU EVER APPLIED TO SUFFER FROM THIS ILLNESS BEFORE?....No.....  
 IF SO GIVE DATE...Not applicable...  
 DO YOU WISH ILLNESS TO BE SLIGHT/SEVERE/CRIPPLING/FATAL...Slight.....  
 IF ILLNESS IS FATAL DO YOU WISH THIS TO BE CONSIDERED A PERMENANT  
 DISABILITY?...Not applicable.....

(Applicants wishing to suffer a fatal illness should indicate at the foot of this form whether they wish a member of Starfleet Command to attend the funeral/cremation.)

DO YOU WISH TO SUFFER THIS ILLNESS IN QUARTERS/SICKBAY/WRIGLEYS PLEASURE PLANET/SPACE STATION K7?...Wrigley's Pleasure Planet.

DO YOU WISH THIS ILLNESS TO BE CONTAGIOUS?....Yes.....  
 IF SO STATE NUMBER OF PEOPLE YOU WISH TO INFECT...Seven.....

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN REFUSED PERMISSION TO SUFFER FROM AN ILLNESS?...No.....  
 IF SO GIVE DETAILS.....Not applicable.....

DO YOU WISH YOUR ~~HUSBAND~~/WIFE\* TO BE INFORMED OF YOUR ILLNESS IF ~~HE~~/SHE\* CONTACTS STARFLEET COMMAND REGARDING YOUR WHEREABOUTS?...No.....

I the undersigned declare that to the best of my knowledge the answers given above are true and accurate.

SIGNED...~~Jessyn Cardew~~..... STARDATE...5261.6.....

APPLICANTS ARE REMINDED THAT ALL APPLICATIONS WILL BE CONSIDERED ON MERIT AND THAT MORE THAN THREE APPLICATIONS PER STANDARD YEAR WILL BE CONSIDERED EXCESSIVE AND NOT IN THE BEST INTERESTS OF STARFLEET COMMAND. UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES WILL ANY MEMBER OF STARFLEET BE PERMITTED TO SUFFER FROM MORE THAN ONE FATAL ILLNESS.

\*Delete whichever is inapplicable.

just how accurate that statement is?// he thought silently. "But I do require your medical cooperation in a small matter. No doubt you are acquainted with Lt. Cardew's unfortunate propensity for playing paractical jokes?"

"Yes, of course I am... Oh, wait a minute! You don't mean to tell me he's played one on you?" McCoy asked, his tone hopeful.

"Indeed, he has attempted to do so, but with your assistance I believe I can cause it to rebound on him. The Lieutenant has submitted for my approval a very cleverly concocted application to be ill."

"I've seen them about. But how does it concern me? Hold it... HOLD IT! Just a cotton-pickin' minute... What have you got planned in that sneaky Vulcan mind of yours?"

McCoy's voice reeked of suspicion, but Spock's expression was quite bland except for a tiny spark of amusement in his dark eyes as he replied to the doctor's outburst.

"Will you be very busy in Sickbay tomorrow morning, Doctor?"

"Nooo... Why?"

"I had thought of approving Lt. Cardew's request... with instructions to report to you at 09:00 hours when, if you gave him a sufficiently severe medical, I am sure that you could find something that needed treatment... and I believe you also possess an antique hypodermic needle?"

"Yes, I do, but... Spock, that is diabolical, and I'm looking forward to it already, but don't you dare try to tell me that Vulcans don't have a sense of humour again! Oh, and one more thing - can I tell Jim about this? He'd love it!"

Spock paused at the door to consider this last request. "Yes, tell him if you wish, and my thanks for your invaluable assistance. I knew you would see the logic of my request." With this parting shot the First Officer escaped into the corridor, the closing door shutting off McCoy's explosion of wrath.

Back in his office Spock signed the offending piece of paper, adding in his neat script, "Application approved. Report to Dr. McCoy in Sickbay at 09:00 hours tomorrow."

Handing the completed paperwork to the yeoman who brought his coffee he gave instructions that everything was to reach its intended destination by 16:00 hours at the latest.

\* \* \*

The following afternoon as Mr. Spock passed through the Bio-chemistry Lab he noticed that Lt. Cardew had a very large, soft cushion on the seat of his chair. Unable to resist the temptation (and he didn't try very hard) he approached him and asked,

"Mr. Cardew, may I enquire as to the purpose of that cushion? I was under the impression that the chairs in this lab were reasonable comfortable."

"Well, sir, I reported to Dr. McCoy this morning as per your orders, and he said - after a very thorough exam - that I was suffering a vitamin deficiency but that as his hypodermic was broken, he would have to administer the shots with an old-fashioned needle; and he did, sir - all five of them... in the rump!"

"Indeed?" An errant eyebrow climbed rapidly ceilingwards. "Not too painful, I trust?"

"Bearable, sir... But I've taken the hint. No more practical jokes on you - it hurts too much. That needle, sir... it was your idea, wasn't it?"

Spock inclined his head. "Yes, Lieutenant, it was," he admitted.

As the Vulcan left the room making a mental note to tell McCoy and Jim about the cushion, Mary Krasnowicz burst into delighted laughter. "I had been wondering about that cushion! You've been hoist with your own petard, Jerry. Just wait 'till I tell Joss and Harry about this!"

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## OLD FAITHFUL FRIEND

by

Janice Pitkethley



It is lonely here. The lair is cold and I am hungry. I cry for Mother - why she does not answer, I do not know. She always answers when I call to her.

Light has come again, and still Mother has not returned. The light at the entrance to the lair beckons me - what lies beyond? Mother drove me back when I tried to reach it; many times she cuffed me away from it with her paw, and once she picked me up in her teeth.

It is strange out here. I am standing at the entrance to the lair; the strong light hurts my eyes so much that I can hardly see. There is a white thing overhead which gives out the strong light. I try to catch it in my paws, but it is beyond my reach.

Mother... The hot breeze brings her scent to me and I follow it, stumbling over the rough ground with my short legs. She is near... Sounds of pleasure and welcome come from my throat as I run to greet her.

The scent has changed; it is strange and fearsome, causing me to stop and crouch defensively. My lips wrinkle in a snarl, exposing my tiny teeth. Mother lies so still, and I can smell blood.

I approach with caution as the scent of another creature is mixed with Mother's. She does not move, and I can see the deep gash in her side. Instinct tells me that she is dead. I lie beside her lifeless form and cry.

The blazing hot white thing has fallen lower in the sky, threatening me. I growl at it, telling it to keep its distance...

A new scent brings me to instant alertness, the sense of approaching danger making me snarl warningly, and my fur bristles. I crouch down beside my Mother, teeth bared.

The scent becomes stronger, and a strange creature appears, stopping when it sees Mother and me. It approaches, walking upright on two legs; I forget to growl as I gaze at this strange creature. Obviously it means no harm to me. Sounds come from it which I find pleasing to my ears; waves of peace and calm radiate from it, and I allow it to approach.

It bends down to examine Mother, then it touches my head. The feeling is pleasant, just like Mother's tongue as she used to wash my fur.

Now I am being lifted into the air... I wriggle and scratch as I hang there suspended for a few moments. The creature's soothing tones come again, and it holds me close to its body. It does not have fur - what covers it is beyond my understanding.

It carries me away, tucked under one of its limbs; all the time the sense of peace radiates from it, and I do not fight or try to escape. For a long time we travel, and my weak, newly-opened eyes grow heavier with the motion; it is very comfortable, and soon I fall asleep.

I awake when the creature moves my position and sets me down. What is this

place? No doubt it is the creature's lair; there is a roof over my head, and the ground is hard and covered with strange furry things. A pleasant smell meets my nose, reminding me of my hunger... The creature offers me nourishment. It holds a feeding thing towards me, realising that I am too young to feed myself. I grasp it and drink greedily.

How good it feels to be full again! I grow sleepy, and the creature places me in a container with soft bedding; it is comfortable, and sleep claims me.

Several times I awake and cry for Mother in the lonely darkness. The creature hears me and sends out comforting thoughts to me until I stop crying and fall asleep one more.

As time passes I grow accustomed to my creature and others like him. He provides me with food and shelter, also affection. Nothing can replace Mother, but I grow to love him.

My name is I-Chaya. I have learned to come in answer to it. I learn more and more of the sounds these creatures make. My master is called Sarek, they refer to themselves as Vulcans...

\* \* \*

Now I am fully grown and guard my master's property against all strangers. I am too large to enter their dwelling now, and have a home of my own in the enclosed grounds.

Aha! I open one eye at a strange scent... Here comes a creature who is different somehow from my master. I rise to the challenge! The creature is frightened of me. I sense and smell the fear.

Here comes my master. He will deal with this stranger...

"Back, I-Chaya," he commands in a firm voice.

Surprised, I obey.

They talk amongst themselves, making different sounds from those I am used to. I cannot make anything of it. I am intelligent enough to realise that this new creature is female. She has come to live here. I accept her as I accept everyone. She is called Amanda, and has a special place in my life now. Gradually she loses her fear of me, and learns how to produce the clicking whistle which calls me.

\* \* \*

The years pass... I keep out of sight these last few days as suddenly there are a lot of people coming to our house. Those noisy aircars, nasty screaming things... how dare they land on our grounds? What the reason for all this is I do not know; I have never seen so many people before.

This goes on for days, people coming and going at all hours. Will I ever be left in peace again? Finally the flow of visitors becomes slower and ceases altogether. Peace at last.

The whistling call wakes me and I proceed to answer it. Both of them stand there, Sarek and Amanda. I run to greet them. How I love to feel their touch! Amanda has a special way of scratching me behind the ears which sends shivers of delight through me.

But what is this? She is holding something in her arms. I am curious, and move closer... it is a cubling! I see the tiny face and tightly-closed eyes - it must be young as its eyes are not open yet.

They do not allow me to come too close as I investigate with eyes and nose. It looks like my master Sarek. Faint memories of my own Mother come back to me, of how she looked after me and cared for me. May their little cubling be spared the ordeal of losing its Mother.

I have new duties now. Amanda places the little one in some kind of

container out of doors but in the shade. I lie down beside it and guard it from any intruders. If the little one makes a sound then I do likewise, calling to let them know that all is not as it should be. I have come to recognise Amanda's form of praise. "Good boy, I-Chaya." A warm feeling comes over me, and I know I have done well.

\* \* \*

My duties increase even more. I am guardian, protector and playmate to my little friend now that he can move around. They have named him Spock... He walks very unsteadily, always falling down! Most of the time he holds on to my fur, and I have to remember to walk slowly. When I lie down he climbs up and sits on my back.

I always have to be watchful; the garden and enclosed grounds have many dangers to my charge. I keep him away from the prickly plants and the Shannav tree, whose leaves are poisonous. The gateway lures him just as the entrance to the lair lured me when I was a cubling. I turn him away from the gateway, sometimes using my nose to push him away and once I pulled his clothing, lifting him off his feet just as my Mother did to me.

I am his constant companion now as he grows into childhood. Times are difficult as I can sense emotion; on many occasions I detect the aura of unhappiness and a sense of sadness in him, and I try to offer my comfort.

\* \* \*

I am old and tired now as time passes. The years are beginning to take their toll. I sleep a lot now, and my eyesight is not as sharp as it once was. My friend has grown into a fine young Vulcan.

Something is wrong, though. I feel the atmosphere of tension in everyone. Today Sarek would not speak to me and ignored my presence.

I respond in answer to Spock's call and immediately feel the waves of sadness issuing from him. He sits down beside me, putting his arms around my neck - it has been a long time since he did that. Something is very wrong...

"Farewell, my old friend..."

I cannot understand what that means, but the sadness in his voice tells me enough. The grip on me tightens, and something falls on my nose; it is salty when I lick it away. I whine in answer, and touch his face with my nose. It is wet - that is where the moisture is coming from. He does not resist when I clean it away.

"My old faithful friend." His voice comes again. "Perhaps I will not see you again, but I will always think of you. I have to leave Vulcan, I-Chaya. I am joining Starfleet..."

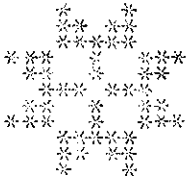
I whine in answer, my old eyes looking into the face I love.

"Farewell, my old friend..." He touches my head and rises to his feet.

I watch as he leaves, walking slowly without looking back. A feeling of overwhelming sadness comes over me, and I give out a long howl, something I have not done for years!

I am tired now, and rest my head on my paws. Slowly my weary old eyes close, and I descend into sleep...

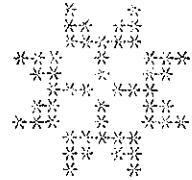




## MINDSIFTER

by

Linda C. Wood



It took Spock quite some time to readjust himself and his Vulcan-trained mind to the reality that logic was not the ultimate answer in life. Kirk watched the changes in his Vulcan friend, the Human side of his personality becoming more and more apparent after his traumatic encounter with V'Ger. It showed in little ways of course, nothing drastic; just a little smile now and then, a flash of humour, a more compassionate outlook towards the junior crew. The ladies of the crew especially noticed the difference, as something that could be described as chivalry was shown by the Vulcan towards them.

Three standard months had elapsed since the V'Ger incident and the Enterprise was on a training cruise that would terminate at Vulcan, where the crew could enjoy some shore leave before returning to Earth for trainee final exams. During the ship's evening watch both the Admiral and his First Officer were off duty. Kirk was relaxing in his cabin, enjoying some holograms of Iowa, when his door chime went.

"Enter!" he said, and Spock came in.

"Spock! Come in - join me in a snort of Romulan Ale."

"Thank you, Jim." He sat beside Kirk on the couch.

"Well, Spock, what do you think of the trainee crew this time round?"

"They are all carrying out their duties admirably," the Vulcan replied.

"No problems at all, Spock? Nothing you want to tell me about, at any rate?"

"That is why I'm here, Jim." The Vulcan took a deep breath. "Jim, since my experience with the V'Ger machine I have had to re-think my philosophy of life and my life's purpose. You and I have, on occasion, been referred to as brothers - I am fully aware that we have a strong empathy - I have entered your mind in times of need and found you welcoming me there. I have also welcomed you into my mind.

"You are aware of the history of Vulcan, of its violent, warlike past. During those times two Warriors could bond themselves mentally to each other for life. This in no way affected their relationships with females and wives, but made them ever-conscious of the other's presence; and if one was in trouble, the other would be able to reach out and help him if at all possible. Complete privacy is maintained, however, when mutually consented. Jim, would you be prepared to be my bond-brother?"

"Spock!" Jim felt an uplifting surge of joy. "Spock, you know how fond I am of you. With all my heart - and mind - I would welcome this act. How and when can it be accomplished?"

"As soon as we return to Vulcan - the ceremony must be witnessed by both bond-brothers' kin on the planet."

"Oh - how do I get round that one?" asked Kirk.

"Perhaps Dr. McCoy would oblige?" Spock suggested, with just a hint of a sardonic smile.

"Yes, of course," agreed Kirk.

"There's... just one thing I should like to make clear to you before we go ahead with the ceremony, Jim."

"That is?"

"That when we are mind-bonded, my life is yours and your life is mine. If and when death overtakes either one of us, the other partner dies almost

immediately, and there can be no reversals."

"But Spock, your life-span is much greater than mine - you should live much longer than me. Spock - you're sacrificing your old age for me!"

"Jim, I would not wish to continue an existence without my bond-brother."

"Spock. Spock, what can I say?" There were tears in Kirk's eyes. "If you are prepared to sacrifice your old age to live your life in my presence, then even more do I welcome you as my bond-brother."

"Thank you, Jim." Spock smiled - radiantly - and left the cabin.

Kirk, a smile as wide as Spock's on his face, and experiencing feelings of deep joy, peace and contentment, prepared for bed.

\* \* \*

During the next off-duty period Kirk called in at McCoy's cabin.

"Hi, Jim. What can I do for you?"

"Bones, Spock came to see me last night. He has asked me to become his bond-brother." Jim explained the whole situation to Bones. "Would you be my witness?"

"Jim, are you sure you know what you're doing? If you die he dies, and if he dies you die. Is that for the good of Starfleet? The two best damn officers in the galaxy, and if an accident happens to either one of you, you both... pop off?"

"If Spock thought it would be detrimental to either one of us, or to Starfleet Command, I don't think he would have suggested it. I have often wanted to reach out to him for his help and advice, and he wasn't there. Now..."

"All right, Jim. If that's what you really want, I'll be glad to be your witness."

"Thanks, Bones."

\* \* \*

It was early springtime when they brought the Enterprise into the space-dock in orbit around Vulcan. A skeleton crew stayed on board, and as soon as appropriate Kirk, Spock and McCoy took a shuttlecraft to the planet's surface.

Ambassador Sarek and his wife Amanda were at the spaceport to welcome Admiral Kirk and his party. Sarek exchanged formal greetings with his son and gave him a cold, searching look as the younger Vulcan, smiling, embraced his mother. She responded with delight to this totally unexpected demonstration of affection from her son.

Sarek extended personal hospitality to the three men, inviting them to stay overnight at his mansion. Over an enjoyable glass of Vulcan brandy, after an excellent meal prepared by Amanda, Spock told his parents of his intention of forming a bond with Kirk.

Sarek, cool as ice, merely said, "If it is your wish, my son, then it shall be so. I shall arrange for the ceremony to take place in two days time in the Arena of Bonding, as is the ancient rite. Spock has, of course, explained to you all that the bonding entails, Admiral?"

"Yes, Ambassador, and I agree to it."

"Very well. The bonding will take place when the sun reaches its zenith two days from now. Prepare yourselves for the ceremony."

\* \* \*

During the next two days Spock prepared Kirk's telepathically dormant mind for the ceremony by simple melding technique. By then Kirk could gently repel Spock's mind when he wished complete privacy of thought, but could open

his own mind completely to receive the Vulcan's powerful transmissions and, increasingly from Spock, his emotions.

At the appointed time the ceremony took place. The Arena of Bonding was, in fact, a small open circular courtyard within the cloisters of the Institute for Advanced Thought Control.

Only Sarek, Amanda and Dr. McCoy were present to witness the scene. Spock and Kirk, dressed similarly in the formal black robes of Vulcan, took their places in the centre of the Arena.

Spock placed both hands on Kirk's skull, and Kirk did likewise to Spock. Gently, very gently, Spock entered Kirk's mind, the Vulcan's personality creating a warm, gentle, relaxing feeling of peace and happiness within Kirk.

Kirk gradually relaxed his dynamic personality into Spock's receptive brain, filling it with all his life's experiences, from the dawning of consciousness to the present moment.

Similarly, Kirk received Spock's complete consciousness, including the Vulcan language, until both men felt their minds mingling and joining into one unit.

When Oneness had been attained, Spock then returned Kirk to a higher level of consciousness, and together they spoke the Bonding Vow.

"My mind is your mind, my life is your life, my being is your being, until death meets us together."

Then gradually, gently, with feelings of warmth and content, Spock retreated from Kirk's brain, they broke the physical link, and the Bonding Ceremony was completed. Of one accord, Kirk and Spock saluted each other with the Vulcan salute and the word, "T'hy'la."

Sarek, Amanda and McCoy repeated the gesture and word, acknowledging as witnesses the fulfillment of T'hy'la - bond brotherhood.

Kirk felt mentally exhausted, but also felt an extra strength within himself, knowing that Spock would not violate his privacy when requested, but the comforting feel of Spock's strong personality and intellect would be with him, now and forever.

\* \* \*

A few days later Kirk received a communication from Starfleet Command to proceed to Zarina, a planet allied to the Federation, but near Klingon space. A Scoutship had reported Klingon activity near the planet, and it was suspected they were considering an attack. Ambassador Sarek was invited to accompany the Starship as an independent arbiter, should the need arise.

Proceeding at full warp speed, the Enterprise arrived in the Zarina planetary system as quickly as possible. They went into orbit around the planet.

"Report, Mr. Spock?"

"Strange, Admiral. I am receiving no radio broadcasts of any kind from the planet. I believe there is some kind of transmission blackout in operation."

"Commander Uhura, open all channels - see if you can get anything from them."

"Negative, Admiral. There is no reply."

"Admiral, there are three Klingon battlecruisers at bearing 224°1," called Spock.

"Get us out of here, Mr. Sulu!" ordered Kirk.

Before they could break orbit, however, the three Klingon ships surrounded them. A Klingon battlecruiser opened fire, and the Enterprise

fired back, but the combined fire of the three Klingon ships proved too overwhelming for the solitary Starship. The Enterprise, seriously damaged and operating on impulse power only, was forced to surrender or be blown out of the sky.

"Admiral, I'm getting a transmission from the Klingon flagship," reported Uhura.

"Put it on visual," the beaten Kirk replied.

"Ah, Admiral Kirk! I had hoped it would be you. Commander Kor at your service." The heavy features of the Klingon leered out of the viewscreen.

"Kor! We've met before - on Organia, I believe."

"Correct. Now, Admiral, I must confess I have a little score to settle with you. When the glorious Klingon Empire lost Organia, I was demoted to the rank of Lieutenant, and have had to fight my way right back to command. I was put through mental and physical torture for not succeeding in subjugating Organia and, as my loss of power was mostly your fault, I would like to return the compliment.

"Would you be so good as to beam across to my flagship? If you come alone I shall spare the crew of your worthless ship. They may return to Federation space forthwith, to report my glorious conquest of this planet. Be so good as to attend me here."

Kirk looked to Spock, who liften an eyebrow and said, "Admiral, I believe you have no choice. The Enterprise can be restored to warp drive in a few days time, if spared."

"Yes, of course," agreed Kirk.

In the transporter room Spock said, "They still have the Mindsifter. I believe that is what they intend to use on you. I would advise you to keep a full bond mind-link open with me in order that, if they do, there may be a chance of my shielding you from its worst effects."

"You were put under the Mindsifter on Organia, Spock. What's it like? Can I prepare myself for it?"

"The machine penetrates the deepest roots of the mind. Admiral, I may or may not be able to assist you in withholding from it. I will try."

"Mr. Spock, you have the con." And so saying, Kirk beamed across to the Klingon ship.

\* \* \*

Spock went quickly to Sarek and explained the critical position. "I believe, Sarek, that if I meld my mind to yours and together we protect Jim, he may survive the ordeal."

"Spock, he's Human; no Human can withstand the Mindsifter effect."

"I have schooled him in the control of his mind. He has a very dynamic personality and strong will. A three-way link may be enough."

"Very well, my son. We must try."

\* \* \*

On board the Klingon flagship Kirk was taken prisoner and escorted to the presence of Kor.

"Ah, Admiral Kirk, welcome on board. I have a little score to settle with you, as I have previously explained. I recall that your First Officer - Spock, wasn't it? - you consider to be your friend. He too was instrumental in the events that led up to the withdrawal from Organia. Perhaps if we apply a little persuasion, while your friend Spock watches, he may be able to find his way clear to giving me the information I require - always assuming, of course,

that you do not give it to me first."

"What information?" asked Kirk.

"Why, the Klingon Empire would be delighted if I were able to inform them of any secret projects the Federation may have."

"I do not have access to that information," Kirk responded automatically.

"Very well, take him to the Mindsifter," ordered the Klingon Commander.

While being led to the Mindsifter, Kirk opened his mind to Spock, whose personality immediately flowed into him.

//Spock, you were right. They're taking me to the Mindsifter now.//

//Jim, Sarek and I will form a link and I shall bond with you through the ordeal. Sarek's mind is Vulcan-trained to the highest degree of mental discipline. Together, in a three-way link, we have a chance. Hold on!//

Jim felt the alienness of Sarek's mind enter his - it felt like a shock of icy water, but Spock's warmer personality recognised this and eased the strain.

//I am here, Jim. Sarek is fully melded with us, and is ready, but you must use your own willpower too. This will not be easy.//

The technicians fitted the skullocap onto Kirk's head, and Kirk braced himself for the impact. Kor himself operated the machine, and turning to the viewscreen he addressed Spock.

"Mr. Spock, will you now release to me the information I desire?"

In unison through the bond, Kirk and Spock replied together. "I do not have access to that information."

The Klingon's eyebrows shot up. "So, you reply together to my question! Could it be that you are mind-bonded?"

Kirk, his mind shrinking from the pain he was experiencing from the effects of the Mindsifter, did not reply. Neither did the Vulcan, who was trying hard to shield Kirk while maintaining the double link with him and Sarek.

"I see," said Kor. "Very well. It appears I may now kill two birds with one stone, as you Humans say. Technician, maximum power!"

Simultaneously, Kirk, Spock and Sarek screamed...

\* \* \*

Kor turned off the power, and Kirk slumped unconscious in the chair. From the viewscreen of the Klingon ship Kor could see that Spock had collapsed too. He ordered the viewscreen to be disconnected, and Kirk to be removed from the Mindsifter.

"Check his brain patterns," he ordered.

The technician complied. "Commander, all his memories have been obliterated. He is incapable of functioning normally."

"Excellent. If his mind has been wiped so too will his Vulcan friend's. I have succeeded in destroying the minds of the two most brilliant officers of Starfleet. My reward should be great when the Klingon Command learn of my success." He looked at the unconscious figure of Kirk. "I have no more need of him. Return him to the Enterprise."

\* \* \*

Spock and Sarek regained consciousness simultaneously in Sickbay, their brains numbed by the tremendous impact of the full force of the Mindsifter. Spock held his head and groaned, then mentally probed inwards to see if any lasting damage had been caused to him. Sarek was attempting the same exercise.

Although they were both suffering from splitting, numbing headaches, the direct effect of the Mindsifter had not affected them owing to their physical distance from the machine's force field. However, the same did not apply to Kirk.

Satisfied that their mental processes, although slowed temporarily, were still intact, Spock said to Sarek, "I must contact Jim."

"Spock - do not expect too much. That was a full-power jolt he received, and we don't know how strong our blocking effect was... or even if it worked at all," warned Sarek.

"I know," said Spock quietly, then turned his mind outward to Kirk.

//Jim?//

He felt no response.

Oh no! thought Spock. Please don't let that have happened - don't let him be mindless for the rest of his life.

Spock linked with Sarek again to double the thought transmission intensity.

//JIM!?!//

Still no response.

Spock turned a haggard face to Sarek, but before he could say anything the intercom buzzed and Spock reached it in record time.

"Captain Spock, I'm receiving a transmission from Commander Kor," reported Uhura. "They are returning Admiral Kirk to us."

Spock turned to McCoy. "Dr. McCoy, please attend the transporter room with me to receive Admiral Kirk. He has sustained severe brain damage."

Spock then turned to Sarek, saying, "At least Jim is not dead, or I would now be dead too." So saying he left for the transporter room.

Sarek gave the retreating back of his son a look that could only have been interpreted as pity.

\* \* \*

McCoy's orderlies arrived at the transporter room just behind Spock and in front of McCoy, just as the field was boosted to receive Kirk.

When he materialised he was conscious, standing, but with a face totally devoid of any expression.

Apart from a sharp intake of breath no emotion crossed the Vulcan's features as he gently led Kirk off the pad and onto the trolley to take him to Sickbay, where Bones immediately put him onto a diagnostic bed.

Spock went to the bedside, placed his hand to Kirk's head, and gently, very gently, entered his mind. He searched deep into its recesses and, at the very lowest level, when he had almost given up hope, he felt a faint contact. He started with the shock of the deep coma his friend was in, with echoes of remembered pain, but he eased that pain and tried to reach the flicker that was Kirk.

//Jim.//

//?//

//Jim, it's Spock.//

//?//

Gently, Spock released the meld. Sarek had entered silently.

"Sarek, his brain is completely wiped of all memory, but there is still the merest flicker of personality. I have in my mind all of my bond-brother's

memories intact. I shall have to start at the beginning and rebuild his memory for him."

"Spock, you do not realise what that entails," replied Sarek.

"Yes, I do, and I will bring him back to me... to us. Dr. McCoy, can you give him something to let him sleep for a while?"

"Yeah, sure, but will it do any good? His mind is gone, anyway."

"Dr. McCoy, you Humans have a saying, 'Sleep is the best healer of all.' Please employ it."

\* \* \*

Meanwhile the three Klingon battlecruisers had left orbit around Zarina, and Scotty and his engineers were working all the hours given to them to return the Enterprise to normal.

Starfleet Command, suspecting that the Enterprise would encounter trouble, had sent out another three Starships, the Reliant, Hood and Ulysses, along with three Scoutships as escorts, to act as a backup. The battlecruisers met the Starships outside the Zarina planetary system and engaged in battle. The Klingons were no match for the refitted, super-powerful Starships, and the battle was over very quickly with the complete destruction of the three Klingon ships and minor casualties only for the Starfleet ships.

Commander Kor was destroyed with his ship. The planet Zarina was restored to Federation rule, and the best Starship engineers in the Fleet were detailed to assist Scotty's team to repair the crippled Enterprise.

\* \* \*

Spock, meanwhile, worked tirelessly and continually as acting Captain of the Enterprise, assisting Scotty with mainline repairs, and as Kirk's therapist. Eventually even he could withstand the strain no longer. McCoy, seriously worried about the Vulcan's increasingly haggard appearance, ordered him to go off duty.

Alone at last in his cabin, Spock relaxed his Vulcan restraint. His constant worry about Jim's condition had taken its mental toll. In the seclusion of his cabin he bowed his head and let the tears come. Sleep finally enveloped the exhausted Vulcan.

The next day Spock went to Sickbay. He explained his future task to McCoy.

"Once Jim's brain comes out of the traumatic shock I will meld with him and with his brain patterns bonded to mine, his memories are mine, his every single life experience is mine... I will be able to rebuild his persona."

"Spock, he's awake just now..."

"Yes, Doctor, I will attend him."

Spock melded gently with Jim. To his delight Kirk's brain was no longer in deep trauma shock. He started his mammoth task.

Day by day, every waking hour, whether he was on duty or off, Spock maintained the mind link with his bond-brother, constantly feeding Kirk's memory back into the awakening brain. Gradually, very gradually, Spock could feel Kirk's personality returning to him, and every off-duty hour Spock spent with Kirk.

\* \* \*

Scotty and the Fleet engineers had repaired the warp drive engines and the Enterprise, escorted by the other Starships and Scoutships, sped home to Earth, stopping at a nearby Starbase to transfer Ambassador Sarek to a Vulcan-bound Scoutship.

Two weeks before the Enterprise was due to dock at Earthbase Spock, at the con on the Bridge, suddenly felt...

//S-Spock?//

//Jim!//

The Bridge crew were amazed to see a joyous smile on their Vulcan Captain's face.

"Mr. Sulu, you have the con."

Spock hurried to Kirk's cabin. This was the first time since before the Mindsifter that Jim had tried to contact him by bond. He entered Jim's cabin.

"Spock! Come in!"

Spock did not try to hide his smile of happiness. "Jim, you have recovered the bond-link!"

"Yes, Spock. I welcome you back into my mind. Have I been gone from you for long?"

"Two standard months, Admiral," the Vulcan replied. He explained what had happened.

"Spock, how can I begin to thank you? You have given me back my mind and personality, and wiped out the pain of the Mindsifter. No greater love..."

"Jim, I am your bond-brother. No-one else could do it, therefore it was the logical thing to do," Spock said with a dead-straight face. "I have been within your mind since the incident occurred. With your permission, I shall now withdraw and allow the healing process to complete itself."

With a slight shock, Kirk felt the Vulcan leave his mind. He felt... alone.

"You must again build up your own mental independence. Whenever you want me, however, I shall be here."

\* \* \*

Kirk improved rapidly and by the time that the Enterprise docked at Earthbase he had regained most of his confidence and dynamic personality. When the flight report was lodged with Starfleet Command, the Commanding Committee granted leave of absence for both Admiral and Captain.

Jim took Spock to Iowa to see, at last, his home country. They enjoyed each other's company, and Kirk's recovery continued. However, at the end of their leave orders came through to each man individually from Starfleet Command.

Kirk was ordered to resign the Captaincy of the Enterprise after his mental trauma, and the command was given to Spock, who was to take her on a training cruise. Jim was to report to Starfleet Academy and train the young cadets in the intricacies of commanding a Starship.

Kirk read the orders with dismay. "Spock, they've taken her away from me again! There must be something I can do to persuade them to give me back my ship!"

Realising how important keeping command of the Enterprise would be to the complete recovery of his Admiral, Spock thought for a moment, then said,

"If you would discuss the position with Dr. McCoy, perhaps he could recommend your re-instatement to the Captaincy of the Enterprise."

"Yes, of course. I'll do that immediately."

\* \* \*

McCoy was carrying out post-flight research at Earthbase Medical Research Centre when Kirk called.

"Bones, can I see you - soon?"

"Why of course, Jim. Is anything the matter?"

"I'll explain when I see you."

"Okay, come right over."

Half an hour later, Jim arrived at the Medical Research Centre.

"Jim! How are you? Did you enjoy your holiday with Spock in Iowa?"

"Yes, thanks, Bones, but it's my health that I've come to see you about."

"Oh? Are you unwell?"

"No, but Starfleet Command seem to think I am. They've taken away my Captaincy of the Enterprise and put me into training school for the cadets. Bones, I'm fit, my mind has healed - surely your medical reports can confirm that?"

There was an awkward silence from McCoy.

"Bones! Tell me!"

"Jim, I'm sorry. The last brain scan I carried out on you just before you went on holiday revealed a slight disturbance in your Alpha Wave pattern. I'm afraid I had to certify you as temporarily unfit to command."

Amazement turned to anger on Jim's face. "Bones! How could you? You know what the ship means to me. Spock has been detailed to Captain her in my absence... Bones, I'll be without him and the ship!"

The look of anguish in his eyes sent a pang of sympathy through McCoy, but he said quietly, "I'm sorry, Jim, but until that irregularity in your brain wave pattern disappears, I cannot certify you as fit for command."

Jim made to say something, stopped, stood up and walked out of McCoy's office without another word.

\* \* \*

"Spock, take care of her for me?" The look in Kirk's eyes said far more than his words did.

"I will, Jim, and after all, it's only a training cruise. I'll be back in six months, and maybe then you will have been passed as fit. Meanwhile, of course, we will maintain contact through the bond."

"Yes, of course, Spock, but just - take care of her for me..."

\* \* \*

Throughout the following months the best medical minds and equipment in Starfleet could not isolate the reason for Kirk's altered brainwave pattern. Unaware of the ceremony that had taken place on Vulcan, the doctors could not know that the reason was simply the effect of the mind-bond, and would be with Kirk until the day he - and Spock - died.

The Enterprise returned from the training cruise, and Spock's first action was to visit Kirk.

"Jim, I've been giving much thought to the reason for your altered brain pattern. Obviously, the reason is because of our mind bond. Vulcan brain wave pattern have a higher Alpha Wave reading than Human. If you would come with me to Vulcan, we can visit our Healers at the Vulcan Medical Centre. They have the ability to monitor your patterns and return the readings to normal. Will you come?"

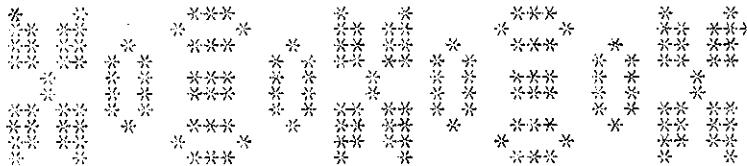
"Spock! It never occurred to me that that was the cause! Of course I'll come. Let's arrange it."

The two men obtained special leave and took the first available ship to Vulcan.

After Sarek and Amanda had formally greeted their son and his bond-brother, Spock explained the situation to his father, and Kirk was immediately admitted to the Vulcan Medical Centre, accompanied by Spock.

Both their brain wave patterns were found to have suffered a break in their synapses because of the Mindsifter effect. The Healers performed deep melds simultaneously with both men to bypass the damaged synapses. Sarek was checked, but was found not to have been affected.

On Kirk's return to Earth Base, the tests were held again and his patterns had returned to normal. He was passed as fit to resume Starship duty.



## REJOICE IN DIVERSITY

I could not help my eyes  
From wandering to one side  
To gaze at that man, unique,  
Whom I can call... friend.

Handsome features,  
Dominated by lion eyes  
And brilliant smile...  
And faith in me, and what we have.

Friend... That name is not given  
To all.  
It is an honoured gift  
Bestowed upon the very few.

There is such joy in knowing  
That I am one of those few.  
To know that there is nothing  
That can usurp our special love.

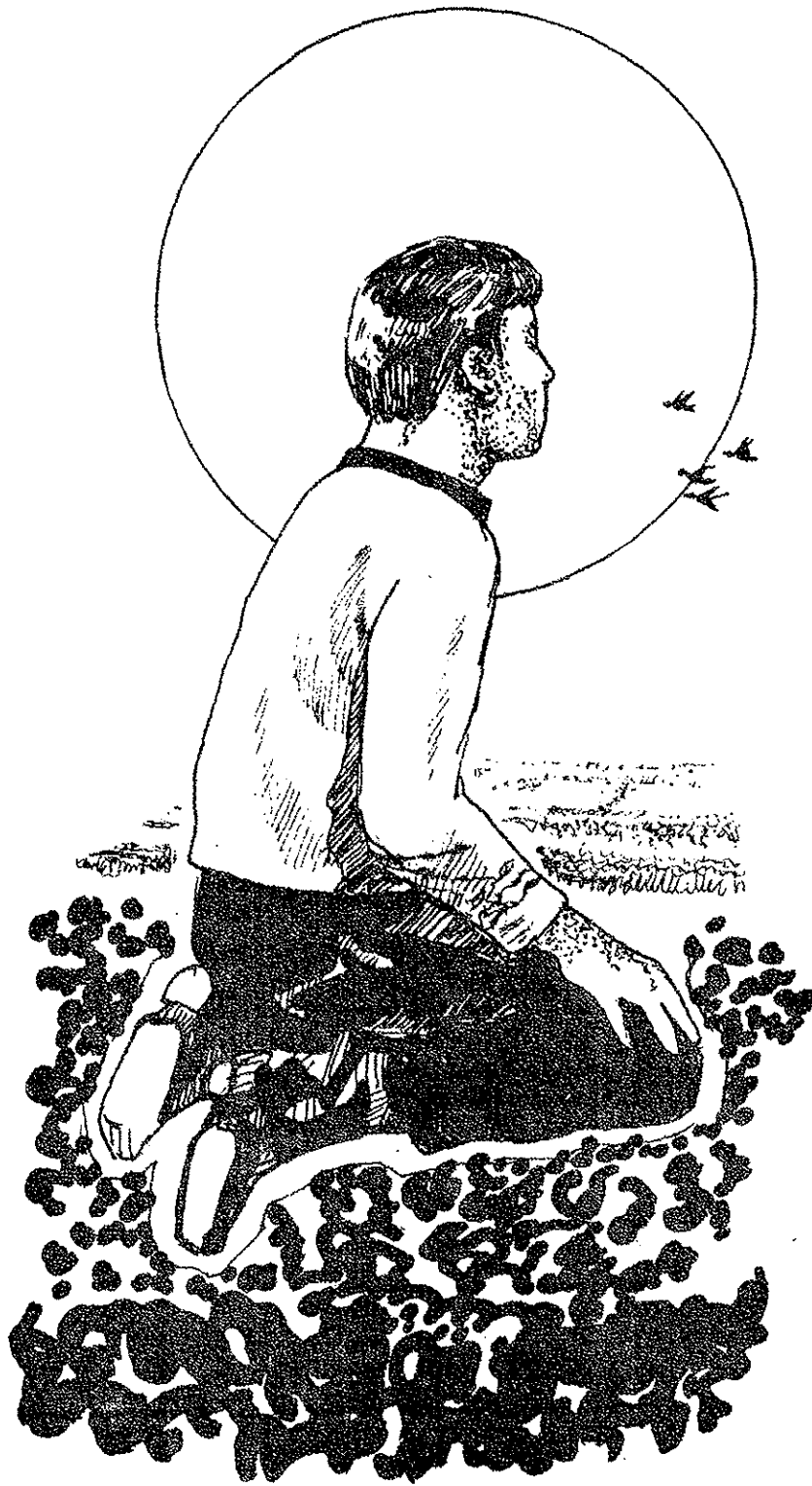
My heritage proclaimed  
The love that grew so quickly,  
But I disclaimed what held my blood,  
In favour of what held my heart.

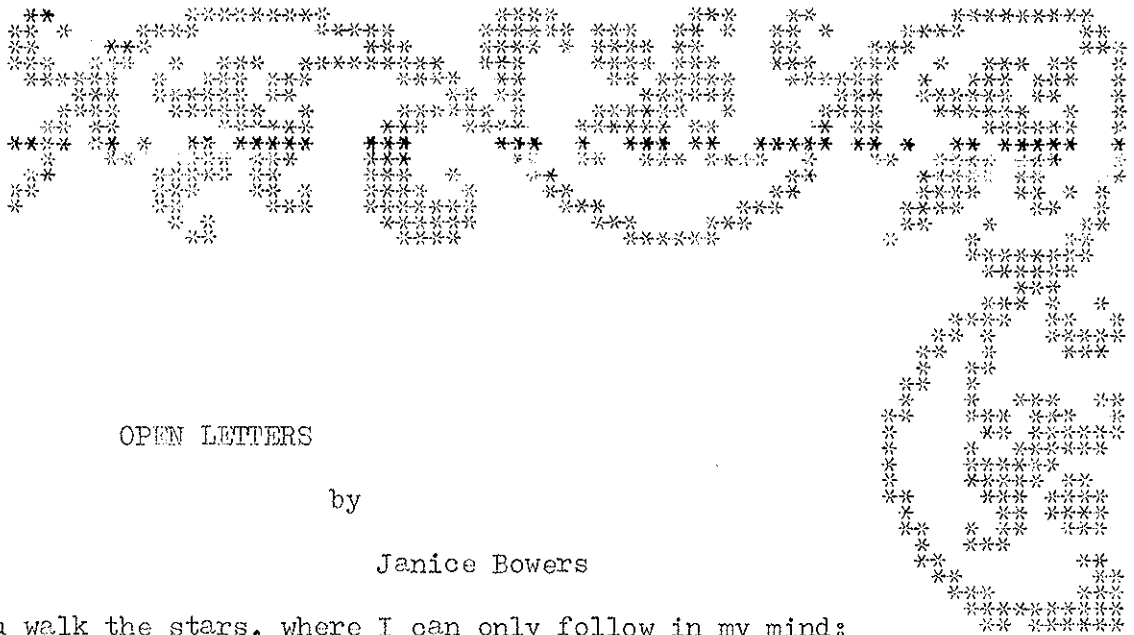
The infinite diversity  
Of that which we hold so dear  
Enabled acceptance of our brotherhood,  
And made my life worthwhile.

And so, my heart rejoices  
In the sight of him beside me.  
He smiles at me - my eyes shine  
In reply... of thanks.

Karen Hayden







## OPEN LETTERS

by

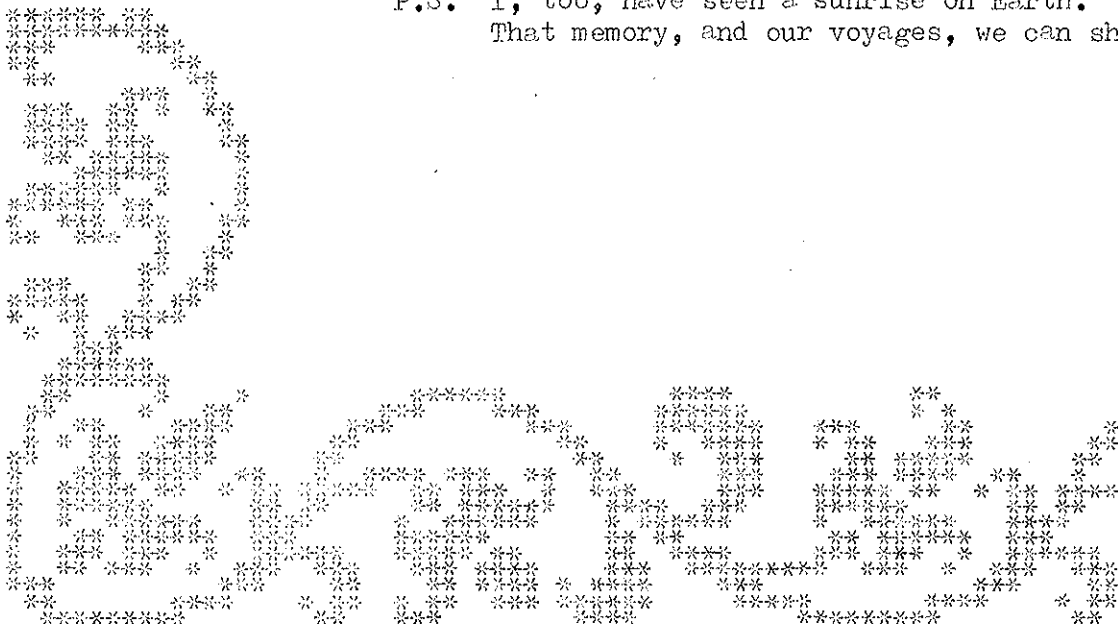
Janice Bowers

You walk the stars, where I can only follow in my mind;  
 Sunrise on an alien world is your common fare,  
 And ropes of galaxies are your broad roads.  
 Your work is learning to understand  
 Beyond all imagination, beyond desire.  
 Everything the universe can fashion  
 Is open, free, laid ready in your path.  
 Your daily bread is daily fascination  
 With each encounter, every new delight.  
 You walk the stars, where I can only follow in my mind.

P.S. I have seen a sunrise, but only on Earth.

We walked the stars, and trod the glory road  
 Down ways you carved for us.  
 We were what you had made us by your hopes.  
 We travelled only by your will to know.  
 You built our lives by giving us your dreams to live.  
 We set our feet in the paths you marked  
 Until reality conquered even imagination,  
 And set us free to go further on and further.

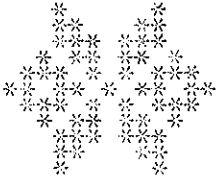
P.S. I, too, have seen a sunrise on Earth.  
 That memory, and our voyages, we can share.



## DIPLOMATIC DIVERSION

by

Sheila Clark



It has often been said that James T. Kirk, commanding officer of the U.S.S. Enterprise, hated diplomatic missions. And so did his crew.

All in all, however, Kirk preferred those diplomatic occasions when he had to do the honours as Federation Representative - at least that only meant spit-and-polish on the planet's surface, not during the trip when even the best of Ambassadors could not help but pull rank.

In his more charitable moments, Kirk conceded that they probably couldn't help it; possibly by nature, certainly by training, they were accustomed to taking a leading role. Kirk just wished they would accept that other people in leading positions were acknowledged by their superiors as competent.

Ambassador Morna Erskine was the exception that proves the rule. She seemed perfectly happy to let Kirk get on with the job of running the ship; granted the automatic privilege of the freedom of the ship, she took no advantage of it but remained for most of the time either in her quarters or in the small rec room that was reserved for visiting dignitaries.

Kirk would have been tempted to think her nervous, unsure of her capabilities, spending her time studying the details of the planet they were to visit, but he knew her reputation too well for that. A diplomat of many years' standing, she had the highest success rating of any Terran Ambassador; only one or two of the Vulcans showed more consistent success in their missions.

Her staff - consisting of her son, a man of obvious strength of character and indeterminate age who acted as her secretary, an elderly married couple who were her advisors, and their surprisingly young daughter who was their secretary - was as self-contained as she. Only the young girl socialised to any extent with the crew, and even she did so only during the ship's 'evening'. She seemed to enjoy the company of the younger officers, flirting lightly with them but adroitly avoiding anything but the most superficial of relationships, and vanishing - alone - to her quarters at a relatively early hour. Kirk had no doubt that she slept alone; in a closed environment like theirs nothing that intimate could be kept secret; the lucky man would certainly have betrayed himself unconsciously. He himself had been gently rebuffed on the one occasion he had offered to escort her along the corridor to her cabin, and he knew that the crew knew it.

Undoubtedly she hoped to avoid causing any friction among the young men - and some of the not-so-young ones too - by avoiding any serious, if temporary involvement; but Kirk soon began to be uncomfortably aware that some of the men were beginning to look sideways at each other, as if they felt that each would stand more chance without the others to distract the girl.

It seemed that he was not alone in noticing it. One morning he was surprised to be stopped in the corridor by the Ambassador herself.

"Captain - I regret that my young colleague should be causing unrest among your crew. This was not her intention."

"I'm well aware of that, Ambassador. She has been most careful to treat everyone in the same way. It is not her fault if some of the men have... an overdeveloped idea of their own attractiveness to a young girl."

The Ambassador smiled slightly, an almost cynical glint in her eye. "Indeed, I find that most men have just such an overdeveloped idea of their attractiveness to women. Meanwhile, to save herself - and you - trouble that is not of her seeking, I have advised her to discontinue mixing with your crew."

Kirk looked searchingly at her, suddenly disliking her intensely.

"Advised - or instructed, Ambassador? It is not necessarily a good thing to deny a young and attractive girl the companionship of others of her age."

The woman shrugged. "Since her acquaintance with them is of a transitory nature, Captain, what advantage is there to be gained in pursuing any depth of relationship? She herself realises it. You noted yourself that she 'treated everyone the same'. If they do not realise and accept it, she has little option but to terminate the acquaintance. She did ask my advice on the matter; I gave her the benefit of my experience. I, too, learned - many years ago - that 'shipboard romances' do not last; but I had nobody to prewarn me; I had to learn the hard way."

Kirk looked at her a little more deeply, wondering. There was a brittle hardness in her face, he saw now, and he suddenly realised that 'learning the hard way' had embittered her, at least with regard to certain kinds of personal relationship, though he acquitted her of resentment that the girl should form any. She was undoubtedly trying to shield the girl from the disillusion she was convinced would come when the voyage ended should the younger woman develop any attachment to one of her 'followers'. And Kirk was not sure, now, that he blamed her. There was no place in the life of a Starfleet officer for a wife unless she too was a serving officer on the same ship and had decided not to have children. Officers on active duty tended to be people on whom family ties sat lightly; the ones who - even after a while - felt any hankering for a home and family mostly transferred to Starbase duties. Kirk had known a few exceptions, and in every case the result had been a wife who was either unfaithful or desperately lonely and unhappy - if not both - and children who suffered from some degree of maladjustment.

At last he said quietly, "Ambassador, what chance will she have to form any lasting relationships while she is part of your staff? Come to that, there is your own son - what chance has he?"

"My son has considered the situation objectively. I tried not to let his fatherless life affect him too much, but he is intelligent; he understood without being told. He will not make the mistake his father did."

Kirk was sure, now, that Jan Erskine's father had been a serving Starfleet officer - what he did not know was whether or not he had ever been married to the Ambassador. Had her child been the hard lesson that she had learned? Kirk decided not to press the point. The important thing was that the unstated rivalry, none the less intense for being unstated, between the men of his crew should cease.

\* \* \*

Beta Leonis VI was a planet at the least attractive stage of industrialisation. Huge factories, their chimneys belching out great clouds of smoke into a heavily polluted atmosphere, occupied much of the centre of vast cities that reached out hungry arms into the surrounding 'countryside', which was itself heavily contaminated by enormous dumps of slag waste and mining debris, the trellis-work of mining machinery thrusting ugly arms high into the sky; the ugly scars of opencast mining cut across ground where all the topsoil was removed, creating a rocky desert where nothing green could survive. Further away from the cities, farms struggled for life in the choking industrialised air where only a small proportion of the available sunlight could pierce the gloom. There was no way that the industrialised nations could even begin to be self-supporting in food.

In the less developed areas, industrialised farming seemed to be the norm. Huge fields of crops stretched for mile after mile, and even there, hundreds - even thousands - of miles from the industrialised centres, the air was still heavily polluted. Only a few relatively inaccessible regions high in the mountains or on remote islands still carried natural vegetation, and even there felling of the trees was being carried on at a destructive pace.

Spock's face was grim as he reported all this to Kirk. "The ecological balance is almost beyond correcting," he said. "Unless something is done soon, this planet will smother in its own wastes - unless the people starve forst. That intensive farming is exhausting the soil - chemical fertilisers are not a good substitute for natural ones in the long term - and much of the fresh water is poisoned beyond use. It in turn is poisoning the sea. There are indications that this has reached such a degree that fish are no longer suitable for consumption. This is not a vegetarian species; the loss of a major source of animal food is throwing greater strain on the resources of the farms. One year of drought, and the planet will starve; and if the felling of their few trees continues at its present rate, that will occur very soon."

Kirk frowned, glancing at Ambassador Erskine, who was present on the Bridge to hear the report.

"In addition," Spock went on, "there are indications that many of the factory complexes are devoted to manufacturing weaponry."

"That is possible," Erskine said tersely. "The contact team's report mentions two big industrialised nations with conflicting ideologies, as well as a number of smaller nations with varying strength and influence. At that time - some months ago - there was a tenuous peace on the planet, but the tensions of such a level of culture must make world-wide peace a rarity."

"And of course the big nations will support the smaller nations against each other," Kirk commented.

"Yes. There is an advisory group on the planet, made up of representatives of all the major nations, whose job it is to try to settle international disputes before they escalate into war. I will be dealing with it," Erskine explained.

"How much actual power does this group possess?" Spock enquired.

Erskine shook her head. "Advisory only, I understand."

"Then it is not very efficient as a unifying body."

"No. As long as 'nation' takes precedence over 'world', there can never be unity," Erskine agreed soberly.

Uhura swung round from her console. "I have contact with the Chairman of the International Advisory Council, Ma'am."

Erskine moved over to Communications. "Morna Erskine, Ambassador for the United Federation of Planets, Mr. Chairman."

"Greetings, Madam Ambassador. My name is Bzth." It sounded like a sneeze. "We invite you to join us for discussion."

"Bzth?" The woman made a fair attempt at pronouncing the alien syllable. "I was informed that I would be dealing with Chairman Trzv."

"My appointment to the position is very recent. Chairman Trzv... is ill."

"I see." She glanced at Kirk, who nodded. "My party will transport down immediately."

\* \* \*

The landing party consisted of the Ambassador, her two aides, their daughter, Kirk and Spock to represent Starfleet, and three security guards. Jan Erskine did not accompany them; a mild stomach upset, while not incapacitating him, made it inadvisable for him to visit an alien planet. Not only did even a minor infection make him susceptible to alien disease, his own condition might infect the natives, who in turn would have little or no immunity to Terran germs.

Alaine Norval was therefore to act as secretary for Ambassador Erskine as well as for her parents.

Kirk resigned himself to a long and boring day, and he knew that Spock felt the same. He felt sorry for the hapless guards, too. This was far from being an interesting duty for them. For the hundredth time he found himself wondering just what sort of mentality the bureaucratic mind possessed, that it could tolerate this sort of boredom day after day for years. Except that presumably they did not find it boring.

But what of the younger members of the Ambassador's party? Jan Erskine, perhaps... he had the sort of ultra-serious attitude that Kirk had noticed in diplomats before now. But Alaine Norval? Was her work her own choice, or forced on her by her parents?

But she at least would be kept busy transcribing the interminable speeches...

\* \* \*

As Kirk looked round the chamber, he felt his brow beginning to wrinkle in an involuntary frown, and suppressed it with a positive effort.

The natives in the room did not look like diplomats. Come to that, some of them did not even look particularly intelligent - though that, he thought cynically, doesn't mean a thing. But there was a... a lack of something about many of them. As if... as if they were men promoted beyond their capability...

He could see Ambassador Erskine also wiping a frown from her face, and knew at once that she shared his... his what? Doubts? But if this was the best that this planet could provide in the way of advisors, no wonder the place was in such a mess.

However, the talking began without problems, and it soon appeared likely that the formalities would be satisfactorily concluded with almost indecent brevity. Chairman Bzth at least had a keen and agile mind, and did almost all the talking for his people. He did seem particularly obstinate about maintaining his planet's rights, but then it was only to be expected that he would. But he seemed unwilling to compromise in any but the most marginal way. He was barely willing to concede anything, while demanding as many benefits from the Federation as it seemed he knew about.

Kirk decided that he disliked the man. He could respect Bzth's single-mindedness, his anxiety to gain as much as possible for his world, but it seemed to Kirk that a lot of what Bzth wanted, he wanted only because it was there, not because it would necessarily be useful, like a child afraid of not getting what the others did.

Although if the man was new to his position, and suspected that he would be 'demoted' when the sick Trzuv had recovered, he could be seeking to gain favour in the eyes of the populace by obtaining so much from the Federation. Yes. He could well be considering his own future. In that case, he was demanding all these concessions, not for the sake of his people, but for the sake of his future career. Wanting the right things for the wrong reasons.

Understanding did not diminish dislike. If anything, it increased it.

The Ambassador, too, sounded strained as the day progressed. Kirk guessed that she had almost reached the limit of the concessions she was authorised to make, and was beginning to worry that the talks would finally fail. Good at her job she might be, but even she could do little against a man who refused any form of compromise. Kirk began to guess that Bzth considered any form of compromise to be weakness - in which case, he would despise as weaklings the people who were compromising, agreeing to his demands...

God - just what sort of situation had they landed in?

At last Ambassador Erskine shook her head. "I'm sorry, Chairman Bzth," she said firmly. "In this, you ask too much."

A look of fury, intantly controlled, crossed his face, so fleeting that for a moment Kirk doubted if many of those present had seen it. Then he noticed a sudden tension among Bzth's own men, and knew that they had recognised their Chairman's rage. The Ambassador also was very still, and watching intently. Her aides and the young secretary appeared oblivious of the

electricity that now sparked between the two negotiators. Spock sat as if turned to stone, and Kirk felt sympathy. Even a touch telepath was mentally alert to some degree to any form of emotional disturbance, and Kirk was certain that his friend was picking up considerable turmoil.

"Very well, Ambassador," Bzth said stiffly, after a moment. "We will leave that matter..."

"Chairman Bzth, you have already won for your world certain rights that the Federation does not often give so quickly to planets at your level of technology," Erskine said diplomatically, clearly hoping by this unnecessary truth to reconcile the Betan to his defeat in this one matter.

"Should such rights not be given to everyone, regardless of their level of technology?" Bzth asked coldly. "Must people die when their lives could be saved, or suffer unnecessary hardship, merely because their worlds are primitive - by your standards?"

Erskine shook her head. "We condemn nobody to death or to unnecessary hardship," she replied. "We do indeed want to give all our knowledge to those less fortunate than ourselves. But we have the wisdom to know that learning must come slowly; just as a man dying of thirst could kill himself by drinking too much too quickly, so a race could be destroyed by being given knowledge it is not yet mature enough to understand. No man would stand by and watch his child injure itself through ignorance by permitting it to play with objects it could not understand; we feel that we stand in the position of a parent faced with such a problem. We give as much as we feel a newly-found race can benefit by, without damaging itself in the process; the rest comes over a period of time, two or three generations perhaps. During that time your children are being educated so that they are ready to understand and handle the new technology.

"In addition... Forgive me, Chairman Bzth, but in this matter, plain speaking is necessary. Your planet is on the verge of destroying itself. We know that you have two main races who are ideologically incompatible, and that much of your technology is geared towards industry - specifically the production of weapons. We cannot be so irresponsible towards your world that we will give you the means whereby you can destroy yourselves. You must first prove to us that your races can learn to live with each other, each accepting the other's differences."

Bzth drew in his breath. His control was obviously forced as he said, "Our two methods of government can never be reconciled."

"I wonder if the ordinary population of either country would agree with you," Spock put in quietly, speaking for the first time.

Bzth threw the Vulcan a look of pure hatred. "The population votes for the government they want," he said tensely.

"They select men from the choice offered them, certainly," Spock agreed. "But if they were given an entirely free choice, would they indeed select any of the men standing for election?"

"Our country is a true democracy. Of course they would," Bzth boasted.

Spock raised a gently questioning eyebrow; Bzth clearly missed the quiet irony of the gesture.

"And the other country?" Kirk asked curiously.

"A tyranny," Bzth replied viciously. "The country is run for the benefit of only a few."

"That could be said of almost any government by its opponents," Spock commented. "I have little doubt --" he glanced at the other, silent representatives of Beta VI -- "that not everyone here agrees with you. If the Advisory Council is indeed international, there are those here who would say that their country is the democracy and yours is the tyranny..."

There was no reply, and his eyebrow lifted again.

Erskine, clearly thinking that the exchange had gone far enough, cut in. "Miss Norval - please give us a review of the points so far agreed."

The girl obeyed, and the Ambassador looked over at Bzth.

With obvious reluctance, the Betan nodded. "Those points are agreed," he said.

"Then we will draw up the formal agreement for signing tomorrow."

Bzth said harshly, "Very well. Perhaps you would honour us by joining us now for a drink to celebrate our new alliance."

Bzth's goodwill seemed forced; but Erskine smiled acceptance, apparently oblivious of the Betan's grudging acceptance of the agreement.

Drinks were brought, one servant taking a tray round the Betans, a second carrying a tray to the Federation people.

Spock alone declined. He caught Bzth's eye on him, and inclined his head slightly. "I intend no insult to your hospitality, sir. My race does not touch alcohol."

Bzth forced a smile. "Then how do you celebrate special events?"

"We do not, sir. An event is an event. It simply happens."

Bzth looked puzzled.

Kirk laughed softly. "Mr. Spock is Vulcan, Mr. Chairman. His race devote their lives to logic. Celebrations are not logical. In this instance, the formation of a treaty is clearly beneficial to all sides; you gain much of our knowledge immediately for all your world, with more in the future, and we gain an ally. Since everyone benefits, why celebrate?" He grinned mischievously at his First Officer, who refused to rise to the bait.

"Perfectly correct, Captain. We rejoice in the union of our worlds, Chairman Bzth, but see no need to parade an emotional display of our satisfaction."

The Betan grunted, then raised his glass. "To our better acquaintance," he said, and emptied his glass with a single gulp.

His compatriots did likewise; Kirk and Erskine glanced at each other, both slightly wary but knowing that if this was the custom, they had to follow suit or risk offending the already offended Bzth still further.

The liquor was indeed potent. Kirk had to struggle to focus sufficiently to replace his glass on the table, its effects hit him so quickly. Spock watched anxiously as the Humans exhibited various signs of intoxication, but before he - or anyone - could say anything, Bzth gestured sharply.

A group of men was hustled in, casually guarded by three armed soldiers who looked as if they belonged to the lowest ranks. Bzth smiled wolfishly as he looked at Spock.

"Your decision not to drink was fortunate for you - and possibly useful for me," he said thoughtfully. "Permit me to introduce Trzv - ex-Chairman of the Advisory Council. His Chief Aides. Also General Lyth, late of the Hwrain army, and his senior officers. Lyth was once my superior, and governed Hwrain... until he grew soft, and thought to negotiate with Bryv of Zlair," he went on conversationally. "I could not permit that, of course. Negotiate? When Zlair accepts our form of government - not before."

A fanatical ideologist, Spock thought as he looked at the trembling men, noting the almost non-existent muscular control, the slack jaws and saliva-wet chins. "You have drugged them," he said calmly, refusing to permit shock or horror to show.

Bzth chuckled. "They are indeed addicted to a drug... it is almost instantaneously habit-forming, and once addicted, there is no cure. Your party has been given one dose of the drug. You have one day to obtain from your superiors the authorisation to grant me the items the Ambassador refused me. If you do not, they will be given the second dose that will cause them to become hopelessly addicted to this drug. If you do... two of them, to be selected by me, will remain here - undrugged - as hostages for your Federation's continued granting of our demands. The others will be released."

"You assume the Federation to be more ethical than yourself," Spock said evenly, "for you would certainly not yield to such blackmail."

"Your Federation is composed of do-gooders," Bzth said, his voice dripping scorn. "Such people are weak."

Spock shook his head. "More ethical," he repeated. "However, sir, one day is not a sufficiently long period for me to obtain an answer to your request. The distance from here to Starfleet Headquarters is so great that it took us almost a month to get here. It would require two months to send a message and get a reply, even without allowing my superiors any time for discussion of the matter."

Fury darkened the Betan's face once more. "You think to trick me, alien. But I will not be fooled by your lies. You have one day." He gestured abruptly, and the guards hustled out the drugged men and the unsteady Federation representatives.

\* \* \*

Spock looked around the small group gathered in the briefing room. Scotty; Jan Erskine; McCoy; Uhura; Security Chief Baillie.

"And that, gentlemen, Miss Uhura, is the situation. This is not a matter on which we have any authority to act. Only the Ambassador can do that, and she had clearly conceded all that she possibly could - perhaps more, even, than she was authorised to do."

Jan Erskine interrupted. "My mother was given an entirely free hand in these negotiations, Mr. Spock. She was authorised to concede anything within reason."

"Unfortunately, Chairman Bzth also demands concessions outwith reason," Spock murmured drily.

"But from what you say, the man's a damned usurper!" Scotty cut in. "He has no right to demand anything - anything at all."

"He has taken the right," Spock replied. "We cannot know the background behind his actions; he appears to be merely a revolutionary, but we cannot tell how popular his actions have been in his own country. If we could ascertain his exact position, it might be of use."

"A revolutionary is a revolutionary only until he has accomplished his aims," Jan Erskine said. "Then he becomes a respected member of his society."

"Or a resented one, if his revolt did not accurately take into consideration the general opinions of the 'silent majority', I believe it used to be called," Spock pointed out.

"In any country where the government - the ruling people - come to power or are overthrown by a revolt, the silent majority are probably wise to remain silent," Baillie said.

"In either case, if Bzth's blackmail succeeds, his position as the leading personality of Beta VI is assured," Erskine muttered.

"It is a pity that he was not satisfied with what he did accomplish - for his own sake," Spock mused. "We cannot accede to his demands; we therefore have no choice but to fight him. Doctor -" He turned to the so-far silent McCoy. "Is it possible to pinpoint the Captain and the rest of our landing party by sensor?"

"No," McCoy said gloomily. "Betan readings are identical to Human ones."

"Hmm." It was unlikely that they were completely identical, but the sensors, excellent though they were, were not geared to detecting minute differences in something as complex as a humanoid body.

"Could we send down a rescue party?" McCoy suggested uncertainly.

"Not without accurate coordinates," Baillie replied. "From what Mr. Spock said, these boys are armed; we don't want it to come to a shoot-out. Even though we have the better weapons, somebody might get hurt. This is supposed to be a friendly little diplomatic party, not an Iotian take-over."

"Mr. Baillie is correct," Spock said. He turned to the Communications Officer. "Miss Uhura, inform Starfleet Command of the situation, and of the impossibility of effecting rescue at this time. How long before we can expect an answer?"

"At this distance... a minimum of fifteen hours," Uhura said. "We should certainly get a reply by the deadline we've been given."

"I doubt that the answer will be what Chairman Bzth wants or expects," Spock commented. "In this situation, our personnel will surely be regarded as expendible."

"No!" Jan Erskine exploded.

"Mr. Erskine, your mother knew the risks of her career, as I assumed you did," Spock commented, "and as I assume the Norvals did."

Erskine's mouth closed firmly. There was an expression on his face that Spock distrusted and made the Humans slightly nervous. They had no doubt that Erskine would take a terrible revenge for any harm done to his mother if the opportunity arose - or even if it didn't arise naturally; Erskine would, they felt sure, make an opportunity if he was given half a chance.

Spock looked at him but said nothing, his face more than usually expressionless. Behind him he heard the door open and shut again as Uhura left to transmit the message. Then he said quietly, "Nobody ever claimed that our work is safe, Mr. Erskine. Everyone in Starfleet knows that he - or she - can be considered expendible; everyone in the diplomatic service should also be aware that under certain conditions -"

"I know all about the risk, Commander. It's the risk to others.... These bastards can't be allowed to get away with this!"

"Mr. Erskine," Spock said quietly, "Either I have your promise to behave responsibly or you will remain in the brig until we leave this system."

Erskine glared at him. "You're a Vulcan," he said bitterly. "You don't know what it's like, to know that someone you love is in danger."

Nothing of Spock's personal anguish was visible even to the men who knew it existed. "Possibly not," he said evenly. "But then possibly it is as well that someone who is not motivated by emotional considerations is in command here." Liar! His mind screamed. He looked across at Baillie. "Keep a security detail on standby," he said. "We will continue to scan the area, looking for any fractional difference in the readings. If we find any promising readings, the security party will beam down, phasers set on stun and at the ready; on materialising they are to stun everyone in sight, even our own men. We are dealing with revolutionaries, dangerous men; any hesitation, any delay to distinguish friend from foe, could be disastrous."

"Aye, sir," Baillie agreed.

\* \* \*

Spock manned the sensors himself, fine tuning the delicate instrument with more care than he had even before used, and studied the reading carefully. He straightened again deliberately, his complete silence more eloquent than most Humans' volubility.

Only Erskine, who hardly knew him, felt it necessary to say, "Well?"

"Nothing," the Vulcan replied patiently. "The native readings do appear to be identical to Human, as Dr. McCoy said. However, I have detected... unusual... readings, which I suspect might be those of Chairman Trzv and his men." He looked thoughtful. "Our people might be in the same area."

"We could beam them up," Scotty suggested. "At least it'd get them out o' Bzth's hands."

"It would also, unfortunately, alert Bzth to a danger he has not considered - that we might rescue our people by transporter. I had thought of it, which is why I called down a shuttlecraft to retrieve me from the surface, but that was before I knew how close the Betan readings are to Terran. Bzth won't know that we cannot detect our people - they might suffer for Bzth's ignorance and fear. In addition, sympathetic though I am towards Trzv, I wonder if it would be a kindness to rescue him? He is addicted to this drug; we could not supply it. Complete withdrawal would cause terrible suffering. I understand that controlled administration of the drug is the best method of initial treatment... or of giving the victim the most comfortable life possible if the addiction is complete - and we have been led to believe that it is complete."

"If only I had a sample of the drug," McCoy muttered helplessly. "We've only Bzth's word that there's no cure."

Spock looked sharply at him. "You think Bzth might have lied about that?"

"Why not? It would fit - no cure, we worry more; we worry more, we give in more readily."

Spock nodded. "Yes. Yes, it would be consistent with Bzth's style of thought." He bent back to the viewer. "The life forms with the unusual readings do appear to be alone," he commented. He straightened decisively. "Doctor - stand by in the transporter room. We will risk beaming one of these beings aboard for long enough for you to take a blood sample and a tricorder reading of his condition. Then we will return him to the planet. If your 'fickle lady' is willing, his absence will not be missed, and you will have the werewithal to make checks."

"Right." McCoy headed for the turbolift, not even pausing to debate the humanity of returning the drugged man to his prison.

"Mr. Scott, you will operate the transporter," Spock continued. "I will monitor from here."

"Aye, Mr. Spock." Scott followed McCoy.

Erskine watched as Spock bent over the scanner again, making one more delicate adjustment. The Human realised he was holding his breath, and hastily released the exhausted lungful of air, replacing it with another that he held once more. His initial urge, to protest the callousness of returning the victim to his prison, was fading, discouraged by the ready acceptance of the doctor that it was necessary.

Scott's voice came over the intercom. "We're ready, Mr. Spock."

"Energise when convenient, Mr. Scott."

A moment, then - "We have one... Dr. McCoy scanning now... taking blood sample... We're returning him sir."

"Confirmed," Spock agreed as the missing life form reappeared on the scanner.

There was no sound from McCoy. The doctor was already on his way to Sickbay to begin tests.

"Message from Starfleet Command, Mr. Spock."

"On visual, Lieutenant."

The lined features of Admiral Komack, already several years past retirement age but refusing to surrender to it, appeared.

"Enterprise - you will endeavour to obtain the release of Ambassador Erskine's party without using force, but should you fail, no compromise is possible. We cannot treat with revolutionaries or give in to force, and the Ambassador's party, and Captain Kirk, must be considered expendable if they cannot be rescued. Komack, Starfleet, out."

As the screen darkened, Jan Erskine exclaimed, "No!"

Spock looked at him with an irritation he was too frustrated to conceal. "Mr. Erskine, we all have our duties," he snapped. "All the members of the landing party knew that they could be declared expendable if the situation should arise. Those of us left on the ship might not like what must be done, but we must accept it."

Erskine glowered at him, and he could read the angry 'Vulcans!' that filled the Human's thoughts without even trying.

The intercom bleeped and Spock reached for it, glad of the interruption. "Spock here."

"McCoy. I think I have something. This drug isn't a hallucinogen like most of the addictive drugs - it seems to be more of a tranquilliser taken to extremes. The victim is so calm he's practically mindless - at a guess, the boy we beamed up hasn't even registered yet that he's been away from home."

"So injection of a suitable stimulant might counteract its effects?"

"It's possible. Also if we do rescue them, I might be able to substitute one of our tranquillisers for the drug to minimise the withdrawal problems. I've started running tests - I'll let you know when I have something positive. McCoy out."

Uhura cut in. "Mr. Spock, Chairman Bzth is contacting us."

Spock's lips tightened. "On audio, Lieutenant."

The Betan's voice sounded more than ever self-satisfied as he growled, "Well, Vulcan? Your time is up. What is your answer? Do we get those items your Ambassador refused us, or does your landing party get its second dose of Shohl?"

"We have had no reply from Starfleet," Spock lied evenly, the lie coming with surprising ease. "The distance involved..."

Bzth's voice sounded slightly fainter. "Trrk, give the prisoners the Shohl." Then his voice grew louder once more. "We concede nothing, Mr. Spock. Your people will be hopelessly addicted the moment they receive the second dose - any moment now. It is now up to you whether they are given the drug as regularly as they now require it... or not."

Jan Erskine's howl of rage filled the bridge; only Spock's extra-sensitive hearing caught the click of the closing circuit.

"Contact broken, Mr. Spock," Uhura said.

Spock glared at Erskine. "You realise, sir, that you have given Bzth a present of the knowledge that it matters to our people what happens to the landing party? If he could have been brought to believe that we did not care, it might have been possible to bluff our landing party out of his hands. But he will not surrender them now."

"Dammit, is that all you can try?" Erskine snapped. "Bluff?"

"A most potent weapon in the hands of a master," Spock replied, "and I have learned it from a master, even though I lack his skill."

He looked thoughtfully at Erskine, then beckoned forward one of the security guards from the door. "Escort Mr. Erskine to his quarters; please ensure that he remains there."

Once Erskine had gone, Spock left Sulu in command and headed for his quarters. He felt the need for a period of quiet meditation, short though his time for it would be.

He could not make up his mind whether confining Erskine to his cabin was the best thing to do. It was undoubtedly the logical thing to do... but the best? The uncertainty puzzled and confused him. He shook himself impatiently, firmly dismissing the stray thought that if Erskine had been with the landing party he would have been less trouble.

There seemed to be nothing useful that he could do. If he simply left, the irate Bzth would certainly vent his fury on the helpless victims of the drug... Ah. Could he use bluff? Pretend... No. It wouldn't work... would it?

What would Bzth do? That was the question. Still thoughtful, he returned to the bridge. "Lt. Uhura, put me on to Bzth," he said slowly.

"Well, Mr. Spock?" Bzth sounded cheerful, confident.

"I have no authority to grant your demands, sir. You leave me no alternative but to assume the members of our landing party are already dead; and since you will not treat with us on our terms, we will leave and so inform our Federation. There will be no further contact. Your greed has lost you everything you hoped to gain." He nodded to Uhura, who closed the circuit.

Ignoring the eyes fixed on him, he moved to his station and peered into his scanner, wondering if Bzth would react as he hoped he would.

Ah. Movement. The drugged men were being moved... several other readings joining them... a fairly large party... they were being loaded into a vehicle... it was driving off...

"Mr. Chekov, take over the viewer," Spock ordered. "Follow a vehicle that is being driven east of north. Report when there is any change."

"Aye, sir." Chekov slid easily into Spock's place. Spock moved back to the command chair, still not quite able to believe that it had worked. Bzth was clearly getting rid of his prisoners.

Uhura turned from her console. "Bzth, Mr. Spock."

"Put him on, Lieutenant. Audio only - wait - now. Yes, Mr. Bzth, what can I do for you?"

"You'd better reconsider, Mr. Spock." Bzth's voice was vicious. "Your people and our ex-leaders are being taken into the desert even now, and they will be left there to die unless you grant us our rights."

Spock paused for several seconds before answering. "We are already en route away from your world, and we do not intend to return. Our landing party is expendable, and what you do with your deposed leaders is your affair."

"At least one of your crew does not agree."

Again Spock paused. Finally, "Merely quite understandable anger at your attitude, sir. We believe in quick execution, not a slow and painful death." He nodded to Uhura, who cut the transmission.

"I hope Bzth's men don't just toss the prisoners off the side of their vehicle without stopping," Sulu muttered.

"I would hardly expect that," Spock said. "Bzth wants to know they are suffering - and he is probably also still hoping that I might be overthrown by the person who was so obviously in disagreement with me - these revolutionaries have very little imagination. They cannot understand true discipline, they

understand only the discipline of fear. They can only understand force."

"The vehicle is still headed east of north," Chekov reported. "Still driving through heavily populated areas. I estimate they will require several hours to reach the desert Bzth spoke of."

Spock nodded. He stood. "You have the con, Mr. Sulu. I will be in Sickbay if I am needed."

\* \* \*

McCoy hardly looked up as Spock entered. The Vulcan watched him in silence for a moment, then asked, "Any progress, Doctor?"

McCoy straightened wearily. "Some. I know which of our tranquillisers will substitute for the Betan drug, so that'll minimise the withdrawal problems. But I haven't found a counteragent yet."

"However, there will be no problem if we rescue the drugged men - all of them - at any time?"

"No, we can keep them comfortable."

"Excellent. My congratulations, Doctor."

"Congratulations?" McCoy snorted. "On what? Being able to keep those poor devils hooked on tranquillisers?"

"Perhaps the change of tranquilliser alone will be sufficient to break them of the addiction," Spock suggested.

McCoy looked doubtful. "Drug addiction isn't that easy to break," he said grimly. "And there's another thing. How will Jim be able to function as Captain if he's addicted to this drug?"

"We do only have Bzth's word that a second dose of... what did he call it - Shohl?... is sufficient to cause addiction," Spock pointed out.

McCoy sighed. "I know. But... well... I'd rather believe him, expect the worst," he said unhappily. He looked at Spock with sudden and unexpected sympathy. "Get some rest, if you can," he said with rough understanding. "You've still got Bzth to deal with after we rescue everyone."

"What about yourself?" Spock asked. "You have been working non-stop since you obtained that sample. I'm ordering you, as your commanding officer, to take a few hours sleep. Refreshed, you will be able to consider this problem with new insight."

"I can't stop now..." McCoy began.

"You can, and must," Spock told him. "I assume you have been insisting on your staff taking a rest period? They can continue here - they know what they are looking for. They can call you if necessary."

Slowly, McCoy nodded. "You're right, damn you," he admitted. "All right, I'll grab a couple of hours sleep - but you do the same. I don't want to hear any of that 'Vulcans can do without sleep for long periods' nonsense."

"But we can," Spock said.

"And if it was essential, I'd say okay - for a while, anyway. But right now it isn't. You've got competent people on the bridge, just as I've got competent staff in here. So you grab yourself a sleep too, hear me?"

"Very well, Doctor."

They regarded each other for a moment in silence, each wordlessly acknowledging the other's worry; then Spock turned and left. McCoy finished checking the sample he had been working with, and followed him.

\* \* \*

When he returned to the bridge, Spock ordered Sulu, Chekov and Uhura off

duty, although he was aware that he would prefer his senior staff to remain on duty for the moment - but they had been on the bridge for a long stretch, and badly needed a break. Stiles was a steady enough navigator, though not as competent at the sensor as Chekov; Spock knew he would have to perform that duty himself. Kyle, currently seconded to helm from engineering, was also perfectly competent, and Palmer, replacing Uhura, was almost as good as the beautiful Bantu. But all three lacked the spark of almost telepathic understanding that seemed to exist between the members of Kirk's regular bridge crew.

Time dragged. The vehicle that Spock watched so intently finally travelled out of densely populated territory, and an hour later entered terrain registering so hostile on the sensor that Spock knew it must be the area designated 'desert' - but it was not desert as Spock understood the word. The ground was composed of poisonous salts, the water flowing through it saturated with the poison. With something of a shock he registered the ruins of old mine workings, and knew that this wasteland was artificially produced, the result of intensive mining, processing and industrial havoc - and even with this dreadful example in front of them, the Betans still continued to expend their energies on more and still more industrialisation.

The vehicle was travelling along an old road, potholed from years of disuse, but still passable. It travelled into the poisoned area for some fifteen miles, then stopped, backed, turned. Life forms emerged from it; then two of them returned to it, joining the one who had not left it, and the vehicle moved off again, back the way it had come.

Spock frowned. Most of the readings showed the distorted pattern that betrayed the presence of the drug; but seven of the readings showed normal. Surely the Betans had not left a guard? It seemed unnecessary. And the victims had been left in open ground - there were no ruins withing approximately two miles. The Vulcan reached for the intercom.

"Mr. Baillie - beam down with a security detail. Phasers at the ready, set on stun - there may be guards with the victims."

"Aye, sir."

"Dr. McCoy to the transporter room. Mr. Erskine may be escorted there also." He closed the circuit without waiting for an acknowledgement, and headed for the door. "Mr. Kyle, you have the con."

"Yes, Mr. Spock."

He reached the transporter room just ahead of McCoy, who looked at him eagerly as he entered. "You're going to beam them up?"

Spock nodded.

"How can you be sure it's Jim and the others?"

"I'm not," Spock said soberly, "but a group of drugged persons has been stranded in a region of poisonous characteristics, and we cannot leave them there. Since they have clearly been left to die, we are not showing our hand by rescuing them."

The intercom buzzed. "Mr. Spock, Mr. Baillie has contacted us. It's all right to begin beaming."

"Very well." Spock glanced round as Jan Erskine entered. "Mr. Scott, energise. Mr. Erskine, we may be in process of rescuing the members of our landing party. We may not. There is no way of knowing if the group we are rescuing contains any members of our landing party or not. Ah..."

Six unsteady figures materialised, swaying, uncoordinated in movement. McCoy hastily moved to help them off the pads, the other Enterprise personnel close behind him. He began running a scanner over the men as the transporter hum began again. Another six unsteady men. They were helped over to their fellows; the transporter hummed again. This time there were only four unsteady ones, and two women - Mrs. Norval and her daughter.

Jan Erskine looked round from here he was helping a man to sit. "Alaine!" He sprang forward and caught the girl in a tight embrace. "Oh, thank God! I've been so worried... Are you all right?"

"Yes - we..." Her voice was cut off as he kissed her. She did not seem to mind.

Spock's eyebrow lifted. Then he turned his attention to the transporter platform, leaving the others of the crew to help the four drugged men down. Mrs. Norval seemed perfectly able to help herself.

The next group contained the rest of the landing party apart from Kirk, and two of the guards who had gone down with Baillie. They stepped quickly off the pads, and the transporter hummed once more. Spock moved forward and met Kirk as he stepped off the pad.

"Captain," he said quietly.

Kirk grinned at him. "Well done, Mr. Spock."

"I regret we could not rescue you more rapidly, Captain. The readings are identical."

"You've done pretty well - and you kept Bzth on the hop. He was quite annoyed at the failure of his little blackmail plan."

"But the drug, Captain - he said two doses was sufficient of it to cause incurable addiction - and he ordered you a second dose. We heard him..."

Kirk's grin broadened. "Ah, yes, the drug. We pretended, of course - he gloated about it, so we knew what was supposed to happen, and he let us see the others." He glanced sympathetically towards them. "We didn't want him to realise, and maybe try something more effective. His precious drug... Our readings and Betan ones maybe look identical, but there's definitely a difference in metabolism. All it did for us was to cause slight intoxication. The effects wore off within an hour." He looked at McCoy. "The Betans, though ... can you do anything for them, Bones?"

"Well, I have discovered a tranquilliser that will act as a buffer, stave off withdrawal symptoms, but it's not a cure."

"Far as we could make out, these men are the important leaders of both sides as well as the original Chairman of the Advisory Council," Kirk said. "They've been talking disarmament and conservation for some months, and had reached the point of making a settlement - but then friend Bzth stepped in. He was opposed to making peace - he wanted his side to overrun the other major nation, then swallow up the small ones. Then he might have turned his attention to peace - on his terms."

"What of the people? What do they want?" Spock asked.

"Mostly they support the disarmament talks," Morna Erskine put in. "Only a handful of hotheads supported Bzth - unfortunately, he managed to get them all behind him. At the moment, Bzth and his army are holding Beta VI on a knife-edge. It wouldn't take much to destroy the entire planet; all it would need would be for Bzth to lose what little hold he has on his sanity and decide to destroy Zlair as being a threat to Hwrain. Then all that would be left would be a radioactive waste." She looked at McCoy. "If you could get them even functional, so that one of them - just one - could stand up in public and appeal for peace and sanity without looking as if he was... well... a drug addict, no matter how unwillingly, it could save the whole situation."

"You sound very sure of that," Spock said.

"They are very brave men," she said seriously. "Even drugged as they are, they fought to communicate once they realised who we were."

"I'll do all I can," McCoy promised. "Now that I have them here I can get more readings, blood samples to work with. Let's get them down to Sickbay."

She nodded and crossed to kneel beside one of the men. "Chairman Trzv, you are safe on board my ship. Our doctors will do all they can to correct your condition."

He gazed around with uncoordinated movements. "I... understand."

McCoy reached down to support him. "Can you walk, sir? It's not far..."

Supported by security men, by McCoy, by Morna Erskine and her aides, the drugged Betans made their slow way out of the transporter room.

\* \* \*

Kirk and Spock made their way to the bridge. Kirk was frowning as they took the lift. "Spock, I wish I could be sure of the right thing to do. Part of me wants to contact Bzth and give him a metaphorical kick in the pants - but I'm not sure that's the wisest thing to do."

"At the moment Bzth thinks that the Enterprise is no longer orbiting Beta VI. I led him to believe that we were abandoning our landing party and leaving rather than surrender to his demands."

"So that was why he decided to dump us all in the desert?"

"Yes. A dead hostage is no use while his safety is a useful lever for a blackmailer, but a live one can be even more of an embarrassment once he knows his threats are ineffective."

"Mmm. You took a chance, though, that he wouldn't just stick a knife in us."

"I was... gambling... on his sadism. It seemed likely that he would choose a method of execution that would cause maximum suffering, especially since he had expressed the belief that we were weak and likely to give in." Spock half smiled. "I would speculate that he expects the 'do-gooder' Federation to send another Ambassador - this time with instructions to give the bold and ruthless Chairman Bzth everything he wants while trembling in fear of his anger. These revolutionaries think only in terms of force."

Kirk grunted agreement. "You're right - give something, anything, to a man like Bzth and he looks for more... and more." The doors opened and they stepped onto the bridge.

Spock went straight to his station and checked the sensors. "The vehicle that took you into the desert is still heading back towards Bzth's headquarters," he reported. "Everything there seems normal. No excess movement."

Kirk nodded. "I think we'll play gone a little longer - give Bones time to come up with something."

"Captain -" Palmer, who was still on duty, looked round. "I'm picking up a surface transmission."

"On audio, Lieutenant."

"... effective immediately. Repeat, the government of Zlair is ordered to surrender to Hwrain forces within twenty-four hours or we will launch a full-scale attack. All Hwrain forces are mobilised. All trade with Zlair is suspended, effective immediately. General Bzth, commanding Hwrain army, so orders."

Human and Vulcan looked at each other. Kirk flicked open the intercom on the arm of his chair. "Bones, time's run out. You have twenty-four hours to come up with a miracle."

\* \* \*

Within a couple of hours, withdrawal symptoms had begun to set in. McCoy set his lips and ordered injections of the tranquilliser he had identified as suitable. He could only guess at a dose, and gave varying amounts to see which would be most effective.

Within half an hour, General Lyth was sitting up attentively - almost unnaturally calm, but in almost full control of himself. Chairman Trzv, who had received a slightly larger dose, was half asleep but even so seemed to be in greater control of his muscles. Men who had had lesser doses also showed and improvement, but a lesser one. McCoy heaved a sigh of relief and went to the intercom.

"Ambassador Erskine, Captain, to Sickbay, please."

They arrived within minutes, and McCoy gestured triumphantly towards Lyth. "He's not out of the wood by any means, but even if he stays addicted to the tranquilliser it won't incapacitate him."

"Bones, you're..." Kirk shook his head, and turned to Lyth. "Glad to see you looking better, sir. Things are pretty desperate." He explained Bzth's ultimatum rapidly.

"Yes," Lyth said thoughtfully, "it is what I would have expected of Gla Bzth. Unfortunately, he needs only to control a few men in key positions and such an attack can be carried out."

"Can you tell us where these key positions are, sir?" Kirk asked. "If we could knock out his men there..."

"Yes, of course," Lyth agreed. "I keep forgetting your superior technology."

"That's hardly surprising," Kirk smiled. "Naturally you think in terms of the technology you know and are accustomed to handling. We have an advantage too in that Bzth thinks the Enterprise is no longer orbiting Beta VI - Mr. Spock told him the ship was leaving."

Lyth gave them the coordinates for the control centres of the nuclear bases that had been set up over the previous twenty years, and Kirk ordered details of security guards to beam down to each. An engineer accompanied each group, unknown to Lyth, with orders to defuse the mechanism if possible.

Meanwhile, Ambassador Erskine beamed down to the Zlair capital city with an armed escort and requested audience with Bryv, who had not been present at the meeting of the Advisory Council, or at any of the several meetings that had preceded it - ill health had kept him at home, but he had known that both Lyth and Trzv agreed with his views. It had come as a shock to him that Bzth had taken over, and he was still trying to decide what was best to do when the Ambassador was announced. He looked up, relief on his face.

"Ambassador - will your Federation permit this to happen?"

"No, sir. We are taking steps already to prevent Bzth from carrying out his threat. In addition, General Lyth is safe with us and preparing to resume his rightful position as leader of Hwrain. It is not Federation policy to interfere in the affairs of member planets, but in this instance, where the rightful leadership has requested our aid to overthrow a dangerous usurper, we have no qualms about doing so."

"Ah - General Lyth was not then murdered?"

"No, sir. Neither he nor Chairman Trzv, nor any of their immediate staff, all of whom were initially drugged by Bzth in order to incapacitate them, thus facilitating his takeover. We believe that Bzth kept them alive to show what he would do to anyone who opposed him - there are those who will face death, yet still fear to be alive but helpless."

"But they are recovering satisfactorily?"

"Yes indeed." No need to add that they might be on controlled dosage of a Federation tranquilliser for the rest of their lives. "Meanwhile, sir, I have come here to speak to you, since I did not have the opportunity to hear your views. I have spoken with Lyth and Trzv, and subject to your agreement also, I can draw up a treaty between our people and your world that will give

you the benefits of Federation membership without handicap to the development of your own world as you wish it to be."

"Lyth and Trzv will have informed you that we wish - all of us - to see an end to the increased growth of industry, in particular the manufacture of weapons. Yet we cannot merely close down these factories, for that would be to throw many, many people out of work, to starve..."

"I think something can be done about that," Erskine said briskly. "It would merely be a matter of altering the goods that they produce. Some re-training will be necessary, of course, and a lot of new, pollution-free mechanism installed. Also we might be able to provide limited emigration facilities for a percentage of your excess population - I understand from Trzv that over-population is one of your most pressing problems."

"It is, indeed - and, unhappily, one reason why for a while war was considered an unhappy but necessary occurrence. Fortunately, both Lyth and I realised that war, fought with the weapons currently in our possession, would compound the problem rather than ease it, for it would render many areas currently inhabited, uninhabitable. We would have a reduced population - but we would also have reduced living space, and the problem would have arisen again within twenty years, twenty-five at the outside, for our race breeds rapidly, and there seems to be nothing we can do to persuade most of our men that they are not failing in virility if their wives have fewer than ten children - those women who practice contraception mostly do so without their husbands' knowledge. Families of that size were practical years ago, but medical science now ensures that only one in ten thousand dies in childhood."

Erskine nodded sympathetically. "It is a problem that many races face," she agreed, "and without space flight, very little that can be done, once it becomes obvious that there is a problem. For races with space flight, however, the answer is obvious; there are always those with the urge to move, to face new challenges - and there are many planets suitable for colonisation that have no native intelligent race. Obviously, each one has to be thoroughly checked out before being cleared for colonisation, and there are always many applicants from many different worlds for each one cleared; but I can arrange for an over-allocation of places to be provided for inhabitants of a world such as this, which is a new member with a population problem. It would be less than you might find immediately beneficial - you wouldn't see an improvement in the population overnight. However, a new member world with no population problem usually wouldn't be considered for emigration rights for at least ten years after joining the Federation."

"My people will be grateful," Bryv said quietly.

Erskine returned to the Enterprise to report that the Zlair were anxious for peace.

"Well, we think we've got all the Hwrain nuclear bases disabled," Kirk said. He was looking rather strained. "It's not long till Bzth's deadline; if we haven't caught them all, we're going to have to do some rather neat work with tractor and deflector beams - we daren't explode nuclear missiles in the air - no knowing what sort of poison we'd be releasing into the atmosphere."

Erskine nodded, fully appreciating Kirk's position. She had reassured Bryv - if any missiles fell on Zlair now, Bryv would blame the Federation, and rightly so.

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Time dragged. Lyth and Trzv, both looking almost normal, joined Kirk on the bridge. Spock remained glued to his station, his attention locked on the scanners. Scott took his place formly at the controls of the tractor beams, refusing to entrust any of this particular responsibility to his underlings.

Finally - "Zero hour," Kirk said quietly.

Seconds ticked past.

"No sign of any missile being launched," Spock reported at last.

Kirk released a long sigh of relief; Lyth closed his eyes in a very Human gesture.

"Right," Kirk said. "Time to contact Mr. Bzth, I think. Uhura?"

"Contact established, Captain."

"Gla Bzth?" Kirk remembered the term Lyth had used. "This is Captain Kirk."

There was a long-drawn hissing sound. "Kirk?" The voice was disbelieving.

"Good day to you, Gla Bzth," General Lyth put on on Kirk's nod.

There was dead silence for a moment. "General Lyth?" It was little more than a whisper. In the background they could hear a hubbub that had to be loud for them to detect it through the communications system.

"Yes, my friend. May I ask what you have been attempting to do recently?"

Bzth seemed to gain courage. "I have been attempting to restore our country to its rightful place as ruler of Thryllv... something you lacked the courage to do."

"It seems to me that you have been attempting to destroy Thryllv," Lyth said softly, his voice dripping unnamed menace. "However, I look forward to examining your official report on the situation in due course - shall we say, this evening?" he went on, almost conversationally. "Oh, and Bzth - we will be bringing our own refreshments." He nodded to Kirk to indicate that he had finished; Kirk in turn gestured to Uhura, who closed the channel. Lyth smiled.

"Our friend Bzth is a very worried man now," he said cheerfully.

Something about his attitude made Kirk look closely at him. He seemed almost normal; could it be that the Betans knew nothing of withdrawal, that in fact the drug they had been given was not completely addictive, that once deprived of it for a day they no longer craved it, even though, as its effects wore off, they did want more? He hoped so.

"We're ready to beam down as soon as you wish, sir," he said.

"Then let us confront Bzth now," Lyth decided.

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But they did not confront Bzth. When they beamed down, they found the usurper dead, his followers confused, ready for surrender. Bzth had killed himself rather than face the men he had drugged.

Ambassador Erskine's party remained on Beta VI to help Trzv, Lyth and Bryv persuade the leaders of the other, smaller nations of the wisdom of forming a proper world government.

Kirk's last duty before the Enterprise left was to marry Elaine Norval and Jan Erskine. He hoped that they would be genuinely happy, that they had not merely been drawn together by proximity and the lack of any other young company.

As the Enterprise swung out of orbit, Uhura turned to Kirk. "Captain," she said, "a call coming in from Starfleet. We are ordered to..."

Kirk sighed. No rest for the wicked. He gestured her to continue.

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